

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

1. Principles Behind Reformed Church Polity

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3. Towards a Bond of Churches

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PRINCIPLES BEHIND REFORMED CHURCH POLITY

A study relating to the Church Order does not seem so very relevant or helpful to the questions we face in the daily lives we're given to live. What, forsooth, has the government of the church got to do with our labours in the factory, our responsibilities with our children?! Is church government not simply a minister's speciality – a field of study with which we need not burden our brains? Come to think of it, is church polity not simply church politics...?

No, dear reader, church polity is not church politics. Granted, in the church of the Lord too many situations (of the distant and the not so distant past) have wreaked of politics, and I am embarrassed that it is so; in the church of Jesus Christ there is room neither for politics nor for politricks. And I grant also that the sins of leaders (of the distant and the not so distant past) have eroded confidence in the value of church polity.

Yet precisely here is possibly the reason why a column on church polity is very necessary. The temptation certainly exists to focus attention on people and their sins. Attention *ought*, though, to be focused on *God's wish*. That is: the accent ought not to be on *how things have been done*, but rather on *how things ought to be done*. As we look to the future, then, let us together consider what the Lord has told us in His Word about how He would have His church be governed.

1.1. Scriptural Basis for Church Government

It is a given of Scripture that God is sovereign over all. I read in the Psalms that "*the kingdom is the Lord's, And He rules over the nations*" (Ps 22:28); "*He is a great King over all the earth*" (Ps 47:2); "*the Lord has established His throne in heaven, And His kingdom rules over all*" (Ps 103:19), etc. As a result, we confess Sunday by Sunday that "*I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth*". He who created the world in the beginning – He's now my Father in Jesus Christ– still rules the world sovereignly today.

After Christ's triumph over sin and Satan on the cross of Calvary, (God) *put all things under* (Christ's) *feet ...*" (Eph 1:22). To have things 'under one's feet' means to lord over them, to have these things in subjection to you (cf Josh 10:24f). So Jesus could say before His ascension into heaven: "**All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth**" (Mt 28:18). Note how comprehensive these two statements are: the ascended Christ rules over *all* things. This includes not just secular governments and authorities, but also His Church. That is why the Scripture tells us that Jesus Christ is the *Head* of the Church, which is His body (Eph 1:20-23; Col 1:18).

Since Christ is the Head of the church, it follows that in the church of Jesus Christ things are to be done *Christ's way*. We confess this truth in the Belgic Confession with these words: "*We believe that this true Church* (this is the Church as confessed in the previous articles) *must be governed according to the **spiritual order** which our Lord has taught us in His Word*" (Article 30). Similarly, "*We believe that, although it is useful and good for those who govern the Church to establish a certain order to maintain the body of the Church, **they must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what***

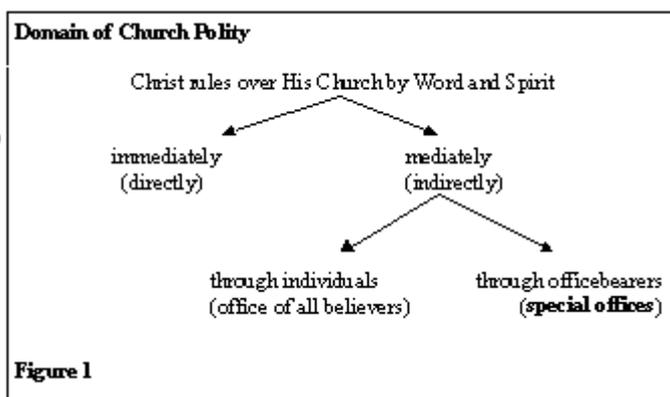
Christ, our only Master, has commanded" (Article 32). The church belongs to the Saviour, and precisely for this reason it is imperative that we – who by God’s grace may belong to His church– see to it that His Church is indeed governed according to His Word. A church that confesses Christ’s sovereignty with the mouth, but does not honour Christ’s sovereignty in the concrete deeds of church government, is not faithful to the only Master.

1.2. How Does Christ Rule His Church?

Christ has taught us in His Word how He rules His church. We confess it in LD 12.31: He *"governs us by His Word and Spirit"*. With the help of a couple of big words, I want to make two distinctions here. Christ, I’m convinced, governs His church by His Word and Spirit ‘immediately’ and ‘mediately’ (see Figure 1).

1.2.1 IMMEDIATELY

The first of these two big words captures the notion that Christ rules without any intervening means. (In the word ‘immediately’, ‘im’ = no and ‘media’ = means. So ‘immedia’ = no means.) Christ rules His Church *directly* by His Word and Spirit, without using particular tools. Through the school of life, Christ works directly upon His people to make them grow in faith, even in spite of the sins and weaknesses of the office-bearers. We may think here of a passage as Hebrews 12: *"If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons.... He [chastens] us for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness"* (vss 7ff).



1.2.2 MEDIATELY

Christ also rules His Church via a particular medium, that is, by means of tools. The tool God is pleased to use is people, firstly via the office of all believers, and secondly by placing between Christ and His Church the special offices.

1.2.2.1 THE OFFICE OF ALL BELIEVERS

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out not on the twelve disciples only, but on all believers. As a result, the apostle could write to the entire congregation in 1 Peter 2:9, *"But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people...."* Similarly, Paul asks each member of the church of Christ in Corinth: *"do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?"* (1 Corinthians 3:16; cf 6:19).

With the gift of the Holy Spirit, all Christians been anointed to the ‘office-of-all-believers’. We are, then, all prophets, priests and kings. We are called Christians because, as we each confess, *"... I am a member of Christ by faith and thus share in His anointing, so that I may as prophet confess His Name, as priest present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him, and as king fight with a free and good conscience against sin and the devil in this life, and hereafter reign with Him eternally over all creatures"* (LD 12.32). Since we all share the office of all believers, we all have a place and task in the congregation. True, we all have different gifts, and so we have the privilege of complementing each other. As we read it in Romans 12:4-8, *"For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality;*

he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness". In the capacity of the office of all believers, we all may be tools in the Saviour's hands through which He cares for His church.

1.2.2.2 THE SPECIAL OFFICES

It pleases the Head of the Church, though, particularly to use special offices. When Christ ascended into Heaven He gave special gifts to some people so that, in addition to serving in the office of all believers, they might also be enabled to serve in the special offices. *"And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God ..."* (Eph 4:11-13). As Paul also says to the elders of Ephesus: *"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood"* (Acts 20:28).

1.3 Church Polity Defined

Church Polity does not concern itself with Christ's 'immediate' governing of His Church. Church Polity does not concern itself either with how individuals carry out the office of all believers. The focus of Church Polity is instead the special offices.

The Lord of the Church has revealed in His Word particular principles concerning the way He wishes His church to be governed. In the Church Order these principles get worked out into concrete regulations.

Church Polity, therefore, may be defined as

"the rules which officebearers have formulated from the principles given in God's Word for conduct both within the congregation locally as well within the federation which the churches have formed."

Since these regulations are built on principles drawn from the Word of God, one must – if one would do justice to a study of the Church Order– pay attention first to the underlying principles.

2. Christ's Authority is Entrusted to the Local Church

Fundamental to scriptural Church Polity is the notion that *Christ rules* in the Church, and does so by means of officebearers. Today's officebearers have only local jurisdiction.

2.1 The Authority of the Apostles

Christ was pleased to give authority to particular persons. In Matthew 16 we read of Christ giving authority to the apostles. There we read of Christ asking His disciples, *"Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?"* (vs 13). Peter replied, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"* (vs 16). Jesus then said, *"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church"* In Greek the name 'Peter' means 'rock'. Jesus, then, says He'll build His church on Peter. Yet the Lord's intent is not to build His Church on the man Peter, but rather to build His Church on Peter's confession. That is: Christ will build His Church on the confession that Christ is the Son of the living God.

Jesus then went on to say, *"And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you*

bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (vss 17-19).

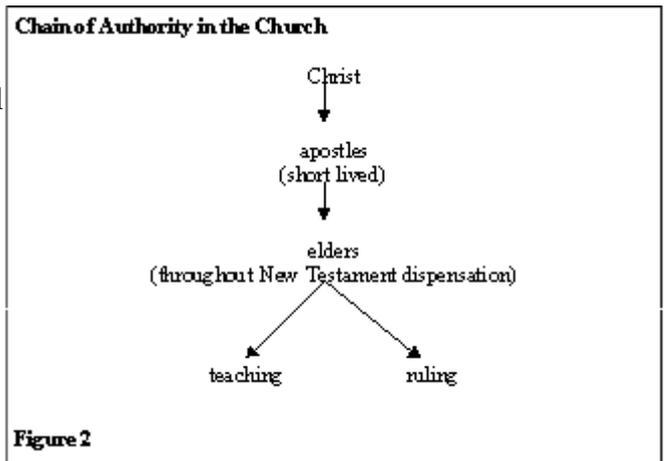
As Christ builds His church on the confession of Peter, he gives to Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Yet the keys were not given simply to the individual Peter, but in him also to the other disciples in their capacity as office-bearers. That becomes evident from Jesus' further words in Mt 18, where discipline (one of the keys by which one binds and looses) is a power given to the church. Again, after His resurrection, Christ "breathed on" the disciples, "and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained'" ((John 20:22,23). The twelve (now minus Judas Iscariot) were entrusted with the function of overseeing the entrance to heaven. In a word, the disciples and the apostles received Christ's authority.

So it was that the apostles, after the Holy Spirit had been poured out, set themselves to preaching the gospel. By so doing they, in accordance with the authority they had received, opened the kingdom of heaven. Equally, they spoke candid words of admonition when necessary. For example, in Galatians 2:11-14 we read how Paul rebuked Peter to his face for his hypocrisy. Likewise in 1 Corinthians 5 we read how Paul exhorts the Church at Corinth to exercise church discipline against a brother guilty of sexual immorality. In the face of such sin there was no room for this man in heaven. Both through preaching and the exercising of church discipline we find the apostles busy with opening and closing the kingdom of heaven.

2.2 The Authority of their Replacements

But the apostles could not live forever. Who would receive their authority when they received the crown of glory? Other *apostles* could not be appointed in their place, since to be an apostle you had to be a witness of Jesus' work and resurrection from the dead. That is clear from Peter's words in Acts 1, when a replacement apostle was sought for Judas. Peter said to the crowd, "**Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.**" When the apostles died there were no more witnesses of Christ's resurrection, and so no replacements for the office of apostle. So the office of apostle ceased.

Yet that does not mean that their authority ceased to exist on this earth. For the Lord of the church moved His apostles to designate men who received the authority to open and close the kingdom of heaven. After the apostle Paul and Barnabas had proclaimed the gospel in Asia Minor, they visited the infant churches and "**appointed elders in every church**" (Acts 14:23). In Titus 1:5 Paul tells Titus that he left him in Crete "**that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you.**" 1 Timothy 5:17 makes a distinction between elders who rule and elders who labour in Word and doctrine, with some overlap between the two. We have come to know these distinctions as elders and ministers.



Here, then, is drawn out what the apostle wrote about the ascension of Christ. At His ascension Christ gave gifts to men; "... He himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers" (Eph 4:11). Of the 4 offices mentioned in this text, the office of pastors and teachers (i.e. elders) is the only one that is still present today. The office of apostle ceased with the death of the last apostle. The office of prophet (Acts 11:28 and 21:10 speak of a prophet named Agabus) also ceased when the Bible was completed, for no new or further revelations were required (cf Rev 22:18ff). Timothy and Philip were both evangelists (cf Acts 21:8 and 2 Timothy 4:5), but it is

difficult to ascertain what exactly this office entailed. Certainly there is no instruction in the Scripture that there is to be in Christ's church an office of 'evangelist'. So we are left with the "*pastors and teachers.*" It is through them that the Lord is pleased to rule His Church today.

2.2.1 Let Honour be Shown

These "pastors and teachers" are variously referred to in Scripture as presbyters or elders, bishops or overseers, as well as shepherds and guardians. To these officebearers the Lord has given authority, and so the apostle asked honour for these brothers. "*And we urge you, brethren, to recognise those who labour among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake*" (1 Thessalonians 5:12,13). A similar exhortation is given in Hebrews 13:17, "***Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.***" Because the Head of the church has given His authority to the elders, it is for all God's people to show these elders honour and respect – not because of their person, but because God has given His authority to them.

2.2.2 Let Officebearers Speak the Word of God

If it is true that office-bearers receive their authority from God, then it follows that they have no authority of their own. When they teach, then, or admonish, they must speak and act according to God's Word. As soon as an office-bearer does otherwise, he steps outside His God given authority and endangers the Church of Christ. In the words of the elders, then, the congregation must be able to hear the Voice of the Shepherd.

Similarly, since office-bearers derive their authority from Christ and His Word alone, they are never allowed to come with a sword in an effort to enforce obedience to God. They cannot, for example, mobilise the authorities to support them by means of imposing fines or a prison sentence. An office-bearer's authority is spiritual. Though this may appear to be stating the obvious, past incidents in the history of the church serve to remind us that this has often been forgotten.

2.3 The Principle Of Local Authority

How far, now, does the authority of an officebearer extend? The authority of the apostles was universal. Hence the apostle Paul could with authority write letters to the church in Rome, the church in Corinth, the churches in Galatia, the church in Philippi, Colosse, Thessalonica, etc. Similarly, when the apostle John was on the island of Patmos he was told by the Head of the Church to send a letter to each of the seven churches in Asia Minor. Have elders a similar authority? May elders of the church of Kelmscott exercise any degree of authority in, say, the church of Launceston?

The universal character of the authority given to the apostles died with the office. In Acts 14:23 one reads that elders were appointed in every church. None of the elders were appointed to serve all the churches. Likewise in Titus 1:5 we read that Titus had been left in Crete to "*appoint elders in every city.*" Again, in Revelation 2 & 3 we are introduced to seven *local* officebearers; each "angel" (presumably minister = ruling elder) was attached to a local congregation. It is also instructive that the church in each locality is described in the New Testament as a¹ "body of Christ" (1 Cor 12:27). That is: each local church is complete in itself, completely a church.

Further, it is important to note that the Voice of the Shepherd is heard *locally*. The preaching of the gospel (a responsibility of the elders) occurs by the speaking of men, and by the nature of the case that is inherently *local*. By the preaching of the gospel, through Word and sacrament, the church is locally gathered. So no single church is above another church (more on this point next time), and no officebearer is above another officebearer. In the words of Jesus Himself, "One is your Teacher [or Leader], the Christ, and you are all brethren" (Mt 23:8). This reality has received concrete expression in Article 80² of our Church Order, where we read, "*No church shall in any way lord it over other*

churches, no office-bearer over other office-bearers." No officebearer within the bond of churches can dictate what must be done in another church. His authority is local only.

Footnotes

1. **Note: the Greek does not have the definite article "the". It is therefore wrong to translate here "the body of Christ". Rather, the church of Corinth is "a body of Christ", complete in itself. (Return)**
2. **The equivalent of Article 74 of the Church Order of the Canadian Reformed Churches as printed in the Book of Praise.**

Guido deBres originally placed this sentence in Article 30 of his Belgic Confession. After deBres died a Church Order was written, and so it was deleted from Article 30 and made Article 1 of the Church Order. It now has a place at the end of the Church Order not because the article is not so important, but simple because this is where it fits best in relation to the overall structure of the Church Order. (Return)

3. Towards a Bond of Churches

3.1 From One Church To Many Churches

The Book of Acts has much to tell us concerning the formation of local churches. In Acts 5:11 we read "*So great fear came upon **all the church**....*" The church mentioned here is a reference to the church in Jerusalem. On Pentecost Day the apostles had preached the Gospel and many had come to faith (Acts 2:41). However, those who came to faith did not remain as islands to themselves but rather sought each other out and met together. So we read in Acts 2:44 that "*all who believed were together, and had all things in common*" and in vs 46 we are told that they "*continued together with one accord in the temple, ...breaking bread from house to house....*" Similarly, in Acts 4:32 we read, "*Now the multitude of those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had all things in common.*" The believers in Jerusalem formed one body and did things as one body. Together they formed the Church of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem.

This church gets mentioned once again in Acts 8:1, "*Now Saul was consenting to (Stephen's) death. At that time a great persecution arose against **the church which was at Jerusalem**; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.*" The one church in Jerusalem was broken up through the persecution, so that Christians spread abroad. Like ripples on a pond, the believers at Jerusalem were spread abroad further and further, as far as Judea, Samaria, Galatia, (Acts 9:31), the two coastal cities Phoenicia and Antioch, and the island of Cyprus (Acts 11:19).

Did the scattered Christians of Jerusalem remain *one church*? Are we to envisage a single 'city church' becoming a 'regional church' by virtue of the fact that the members of the 'city church' were dispersed over numerous towns throughout the surrounding region? It appears not. Instead of suggesting the formation of a regional church (say, of Judea and/or Samaria and/or Galatia), the text of Scripture would have us think of numerous separate, complete churches arising in the towns to which the Christians were scattered. The evidence is as follows:

- in Acts 9:31 we read of churches: "*Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified*" A footnote to this verse informs us that some manuscripts record church in the singular. The singular may well be the better reading, but the ambiguity of the textual witnesses indicates that one cannot build strong arguments either way on this text.
- Far more compelling is what the apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians. He writes in 1:13, "*For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it.*" This text is a reference to the persecution he had begun in the church in Jerusalem, as recorded in Acts 8:1. Note the singular; Paul speaks about "the church in Jerusalem". The apostle goes on to relate that God called him through His grace

(i.e. on the way to Damascus), that he then went on to Arabia, returned to Damascus, and so didn't go back to Jerusalem to see Peter till three years later (Galatians 1:15-20). Striking, now, is how Paul describes the ecclesiastical scene after three years had passed. For Paul says of himself that he "*was unknown by face to the churches of Judea which were in Christ*" (Galatians 1:22). Note the use of the plural. Note also that "the church in Jerusalem" has changed to "the churches of Judea". That is: as a result of the persecution of the church in Jerusalem, this one church became the churches of Judea. The one church became many churches.

- Further texts illustrate the continuation of this development:
- Acts 11:26: "*And when (Barnabas) had found (Saul), he brought him to **Antioch**. So it was that for a whole year they assembled with **the church** and taught a great many people. And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch.*" Note that the church in Antioch is described as a complete body in itself, and not a part of a wider, regional church.
- Acts 14:23: Paul and Barnabas had preached the Gospel throughout Asia Minor. "*So when they had appointed elders in **every church**, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*" Here we read of a plurality of churches.
- Acts 15:41: "*And (Paul) went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.*" Again, not one church, but many churches.
- Acts 16:5: "*So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily.*"
- Acts 20:17: "*From Miletus (Paul) sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church.*" To these elders Paul gave this charge: "*Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd **the church of God** which He purchased with His own blood*" (vs 28). These elders were made overseers of the flock in Ephesus (and not the flock in Antioch or in Jerusalem), and this flock in Ephesus is "the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" – complete in itself.
- 1 Corinthians 12:27: Paul describes "the church of God which is at Corinth" (I Corinthians 1:2) as "a body of Christ". That is: this church in Corinth is a complete body in itself. By extension, each church in any given community is a complete body.

The term 'church', then, is not to conjure up in our minds the notion of a regional or national entity of which each local church is a subset. The evidence of Scripture indicates instead that each local church is a complete church in itself.

3.2. Churches Are Autonomous But Not Independent

Although each of the New Testament churches were separate churches, we yet read of cooperation and interaction between them. The following points serve to illustrate this:

3.2.1 MUTUAL INTEREST

Believers who had been scattered by the persecution in Jerusalem had passed on the Gospel not only to other Jews but also to Gentiles. Under God's blessing, many Gentiles came to faith. When it was heard in Jerusalem that Gentiles in Antioch had been converted to the Christian faith (let me recall that Jews were conditioned to keep the gospel for themselves; that's why Peter needed the vision of the clean and unclean animals, Acts 10), the church at Jerusalem sent out Barnabas with the mandate "*to go as far as Antioch*" (Acts 11:22). The words "go as far as" suggest that Barnabas was not to travel directly to Antioch to investigate developments there, but was instead to touch base with various of the churches along the way, till he finally ended up in Antioch. Of significance to our topic is the fact that the church at Jerusalem displayed an interest in what was going on in other churches. The church in Jerusalem did not consider itself an island unattached to and uninterested in the other churches; the church in Jerusalem instead recognised that there was a bond of faith between the various churches.

3.2.2 MUTUAL CARE

Acts 11:27-30 also tells us of prophets from Jerusalem going out to Antioch. One of them, Agabus, prophesied a severe, extensive famine which caused a need for assistance in Judea. In response to this prophesy, the believers in Antioch sent relief along with Barnabas and Saul to the elders in Judea. In so doing, they displayed an attitude of care to those with whom they shared a bond of faith.

The same attitude was evident amongst the churches in Macedonia and Achaia. Even though they were very distant from the church at Jerusalem and didn't know the brethren there, "*it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem*" (Romans 15:25,26). Paul set this deed of the Macedonian brethren as an example before the church at Corinth: "*Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints*" (2 Corinthians 8:1-4). Further on in his letter (2 Corinthians 9:1-5) Paul encourages the Corinthians also to give for the benefit of the needy in churches outside of Corinth.

The Thessalonians, who lived in the south of Greece, likewise made it their business to help out the brethren who lived in Macedonia, northern Greece. Paul encouraged the saints of Thessalonica, "*But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia*" (1 Thessalonians 4:9,10).

3.2.3 LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

Paul writes to the saints in Rome, "*I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also*" (Romans 16:1,2). Similarly, we read in Acts 18:27 of Apollos receiving an 'attestation' when he travelled from Ephesus to Achaia: "*And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived he greatly helped those who had believed through grace.*" That letters of commendation were written concerning a member travelling to another church demonstrates a recognition of the one bond of faith tying the churches together.

3.2.4 GREETINGS

In sending each other greetings, the churches gave expression to the fact that even though they were separate churches, they recognised each other as sister churches in Christ, united by their faith in Him. For that reason the apostle John concluded his second epistle, "*The children of your elect sister greet you*" (2 John: 13). Equally, to the church at Rome Paul writes, "*The churches of Christ greet you*" (Romans 16:16). And to the Corinthians: "*The churches of Asia greet you*" (1 Corinthians 16:19).

3.3 The Doctrinal Basis For Churches Federating Together

To draw out why the local churches ought to work together, I look at the question first from a doctrinal point of view, and then from the angle of the communion of saints.

3.3.1 Doctrinal

The Lord has revealed in Scripture various characteristics of Christ's church. We confess this aspect of God's revelation in the Nicene Creed, with the words that "*I believe one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church*" (Book of Praise, p. 438).

3.3.1.1 THE CHURCH IS ONE

Various texts from Scripture compel us to view the church as one.

- Matthew 1:21: the angel told Joseph to *"call His name JESUS, for He will save His **people** from their sins."* Jesus did not come to save individuals, so many islands in a big sea, but a people, one people.
- Acts 15:14: James draws out the unity of God's own, when he says: *"Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them **a people** for His name."* The saved are not unconnected individuals.
- 1 Corinthians 10:17: with reference to the Lord's Supper the apostle Paul says, *"For we, **though many, are one bread and one body**; for we all partake of that one bread."* Note that the "one bread and one body" of which the apostle speaks comprises more persons than simply the members of the church of Corinth, for he uses the word "we" – and so includes himself, though he was not a member of the Corinthian congregation.
- Ephesians 4:4-6: here this unity comes out in all its strength: *"there is **one body and one Spirit**, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all."* First and foremost, there is a spiritual bond between all the churches. They have all heard the one Gospel. Through the working of the one and the same Holy Spirit one faith was worked in all their hearts. The unity of the Spirit was there and therefore Paul urged the Ephesians in vs 3 to hold on to it: *"endeavouring to **keep the unity of the Spirit** in the bond of peace."* The gift of unity contains within itself the mandate to maintain the unity.

3.3.1.2 THE CHURCH IS CATHOLIC

The word 'catholic' means universal, and so describes the notion that the church of Christ is to be found all over the earth. This is the promise of Scripture:

- Genesis 22:18: God said to Abraham: *"In your seed **all the nations of the earth** shall be blessed...."* The Gospel will go to people of every tribe and tongue and nation.
- Psalm 87:14: by the election of God, persons from, Rahab, Babylon, Philistia, Tyre and Ethiopia all have their spiritual roots in Jerusalem, the city of God.
- Revelation 7:9: in the vision Jesus showed him, John saw *"a great multitude which no one could number, **of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues**, standing before the throne and before the Lamb"*

We confess this catholicity of the church in Article 27 of the *Belgic Confession* with these words, *"We believe and profess **one catholic or universal church** ... Moreover, this holy church is **not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world.**"*

3.3.1.3 THE CHURCH IS APOSTOLIC

The Lord has revealed that His one church, in whatever locality it may be gathered on the face of the earth, believes the same doctrine, viz, the doctrine given to men by inspiration of God through the apostles.

- Ephesians 2:20 describes the church as *"having been built on the **foundation of the apostles and prophets**"*
- Revelation 21:14 describes the new Jerusalem, which is the church in her perfection: *"Now the wall of the city had **twelve foundations**, and on them were the names of the **twelve apostles** of the Lamb."*

It is because God has revealed one gospel that Paul could instruct the saints at Colossae to see to it that his letter to the Colossians *"is read also in the church of the Laodiceans, and that you likewise read the epistle from Laodicea"* (Colossians 4:16). The one truth is valid for all the churches. That explains too why James could write one letter *"to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad"* (James 1:1). The "twelve tribes" is Old Testament language to describe the New Testament Israel, the Church. There is one truth, one message valid for all the churches of Christ, and this one truth forms the basis of the bond between all the churches.

3.3.1.4 THE CHURCH IS HOLY

All the churches of Christ share in the same sanctifying work of Christ's Holy Spirit; they are all holy. The fact that one Holy Spirit works the same sanctification in all the churches draws out the unity that exists between these churches.

- 1 Corinthians 1:2: Paul can address the Corinthian church as "*those who are **sanctified** in Christ Jesus, called to be saints*"
- 1 Peter 1:1: Peter can address "*the pilgrims of the Dispersion*" in a similar way. Though these "pilgrims" are spread throughout five districts ("*Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia*") they are all "*elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in **sanctification** of the Spirit*"
- James 1:27: James addresses numerous churches with his one letter (he writes "*to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad*"), and instructs all "**to keep oneself unspotted from the world.**" Holiness cannot characterise just one local church, but must characterise all since the numerous local churches are united by the one work of the one Holy Spirit.

3.3.1.5 CONCLUSION

God has told us in His Word that the churches are separate, autonomous. In His Word God has also told us that His Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The churches we read of in Acts, all separate churches but all equally the Lord's churches, therefore made it their business to express and demonstrate an active interest in each other. In various ways these autonomous churches gave expression to the spiritual bond that united them. This thought comes back in what we confess in Article 27 of the *Belgic Confession*, that

"this holy church ... is joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith."

3.3.2 Exercising Communion Of Saints As Churches

The notion that there is no room for churches to exist independently from each other can also be drawn out from the angle of the communion of saints.

- In Proverbs 11:14 and 15:22 Solomon advises, "*Where there is no counsel, the people fall; But **in the multitude of counsellors there is safety.... Without counsel, plans go awry, But in the multitude of counsellors they are established.***" In other words, rather than tackle problems on your own, one ought to seek advice from others in order to make a wiser and more informed decision. For finite and sinful people in this broken world, seeking advice from others is necessary; it is equally necessary for a local church, for the same reasons, to seek input from other churches in facing the challenges on its path.
- Philippians 2:3,4: individuals not only need others; persons are also instructed to reach out to others. "*Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, **but also for the interests of others.***" In the brokenness of this world, it is equally necessary that each church look to the interests of other churches and offer assistance in the struggles of this life.
- 1 Corinthians 14:36: in Corinth women were being permitted to speak in Church. Paul wanted to show the church of Corinth that this was incorrect. To do so he appeals to practices elsewhere: "*did the word of God come originally from you? Or was it you only that it reached?*" That is: the gospel began in Jerusalem, and in that church the women did not speak in church. So the church of Jerusalem is held up as an example in Corinth as to how God wished to be worshipped in church

Here, then, is the material of the *Belgic Confession*, Article 28, applied to the level of inter-church relations:

*"We believe, since this holy assembly and congregation is the assembly of the redeemed and there is no salvation outside of it, that no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, no matter what his status or standing may be. But all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the church. They must submit themselves to its instruction and discipline, bend their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ, and **serve the edification of the brothers and sisters, according to the talents which God has given them as members of the same body.**"*

The Lord has saved a people for Himself, and in view of Satan's constant attacks on the redeemed, plus the weaknesses that continue to hamper the redeemed, God's people cannot afford to stand independently of each other as so many individuals. Christians need each other. That is true of churches as well.

We need, therefore, to guard against the danger of independentism, the thought that we can do it alone. This is not how Christ would have it. All the churches have received the same Gospel and all have received the grace needed to be able to help each other. This is true for us as churches within the one country, but by extension this also applies to us as churches on an international level.

The bond that exists between the churches is the fact that all are saved by one Christ. Each church is *His* church, and therefore each church *has* a bond with the church of the next locality. Admittedly, in the Bible we do not read of churches forming a bond or a federation. But that need not surprise us, for a bond is an organisational expression of an existing unity, and it takes time for such an organisational expression to come into being. Nevertheless, it is a very scriptural thought that all God's churches be bonded together. Though many miles or different cultures may separate the churches, that does not take away from the fact that there exists a bond, a unity. Such a bond is expressed through the formation of, and the interaction of churches within, a bond such as the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, or the Canadian Reformed Churches.

3.4 To Join A Bond Of Churches is Voluntary

From the above, it follows that forming and joining a bond of churches is an act of obedience to the Lord. No man on earth, though, can compel another church to join a bond. In that regard, forming or joining a bond is totally a voluntary matter. This may well sound like a contradiction. Paul likewise, with regard to collecting money for the saints, writes to the Corinthians that to give was an act of obedience, yet it was totally voluntary. "*Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches in Galatia, so you **must do also...***" (1 Corinthians 16:1-3). Here Paul tells them of a need in the church at Jerusalem. Since the saints in Corinth and the saints in Jerusalem are equally the fruits of the work of one Holy Spirit, giving financial assistance to each other is at bottom not voluntary; rather, it is mandatory ("must do"). At the same time, Paul says, "*I speak **not by commandment**, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich. And in this I give **advice***" (2 Corinthians 8:8-10). So: Paul does not 'lay down the law' on the Corinthians in the matter of giving for others; he gives his "advice". But, he says, it's an advice the Corinthians "must" accept. That is: though Paul could not compel them or make them give, yet before God it remained their duty to give. Likewise, no church can compel another church to join a bond of churches. This is a decision each church must make for itself. However, the criteria on which this decision is based must always be, 'what example has Christ given and how can I most obediently and responsibly do as He would want of me?'

Any church which joins a bond of churches acknowledges thereby that it accepts other churches in that bond as churches of Christ and promises to stand by these churches no matter what happens and to give whatever assistance may be required, be it financial help, spiritual help, or by way of admonition. Churches within a bond promise to stand beside each other in service of the Lord.

How it is that churches go about helping each other has been written down in the Church Order. Each church then which joins the bond promises to maintain and abide by the Church Order. This is no empty promise, for a Christian is bound to keep his word (Psalm 15). So the church at Kelmscott can therefore expect the Church at Mt Nasura to speak up and tell it when it goes astray, or expect help from other churches should it run into financial difficulty. As brothers in the Lord we are always to be ready to come to each other's aid.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

4. A Historical Overview Of Church Government

Different systems of church government have arisen over the centuries, and still exist in various churches today. These can be categorised as follows:

- 1) Papal
- 2) Lutheran (Erastian)
- 3) Reformed / Presbyterian
- 4) Congregational
- 5) Collegial

In what follows, we deal in some detail with the first three of these five. The remaining two receive brief mention.

4.1 Papal Church Government

4.1.1 PRESSURES ON THE ELDERSHIP IN THE EARLY CHURCHES

We have learned from Scripture that the Lord cares for His Church by using people as His tools. Firstly, He uses all of us in the office of all believers, to which we have all been anointed by the Holy Spirit. As prophets, priests and kings, we are all mandated and equipped to confess God's Name, live in thankful service to Him, and fight against the attacks of Satan (HC, LD 12). Secondly, God calls and enables some of His people to serve in the special offices, namely the offices of elder and deacon. (See further Section 1.2 above.)

The New Testament tells us how the one church in Jerusalem developed into numerous churches. (See Section 1.3 above.) We read of churches being established in Lystra, Iconium, Antioch, and Thessalonica, to mention but a few. The establishment of so many new churches placed great demands on the office-bearers, particularly on the elders. The following can be mentioned:

4.1.1.1 Society was basically heathen

When the apostles preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ in places such as Philippi, Ephesus, Corinth or Rome, the Lord blessed their work by converting many hearers to the Christian faith. These converts, however, were in need of much instruction for they were either Jews who had tenaciously clung to the Old Testament or Gentiles who knew (next to) nothing about the Bible at all. In a word, they had grown up in a heathen environment, and were saturated with heathen habits, values and views. The elders had the responsibility of teaching these new converts.

What made this task the more difficult was that the elders had to give such instruction in a society that had no Christian background. In our society today, the influence of a Christian heritage is still very present. Concepts as Sunday observance, the husband's headship in the family, having only one wife, etc, have a place in our cultural heritage. This heritage did not exist in the days of the early church. So the elders had to teach the people very much from the ground up.

4.1.1.2 Church Life was a new concept

As soon as there were a number of converts in a particular place, these converts needed to form one congregation. They were, after all, a communion of saints. But if they *were* a communion of saints, they

also had to *be* a communion of saints, one body functioning together for mutual benefit. This was a new concept, and undoubtedly required much instruction on the part of the elders and self-denial on the part of the new Christians to function as one body. Here was need for leadership on the part of the elders.

4.1.1.3 The threat of heresies

Many recent converts from heathendom invariably resulted in many heresies finding their way into the churches. As an example: Paul and Barnabas, upon their return from a missionary journey, settled in Antioch and taught the church there (Acts 14:26-28). However, in Acts 15:1 we read "*And certain men (these were Christians!), came down from Judea and taught the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."* Here we have Christians who cling to the teaching of their youth, namely, that one needs to be circumcised in order to be saved. Similarly, we read in 1 Corinthians 5 of a church tolerating the sinful practice of a brother living with his stepmother – a leftover of the promiscuity that characterised the lives of the Corinthian Christians prior to their conversion. The letters of John attack the heresy of Gnosticism, a teaching that tries to harmonise the Christian faith with Greek philosophy. We can understand that the elders (particularly after the apostles died) were required to give leadership in the face of these heresies. This put very much pressure on the elders.

4.1.1.4 Copies of the Bible were rare

There were very few copies of the Bible available to the new converts or to the elders. The Bible at that time consisted of only the Old Testament, plus some letters of Paul circulating amongst the churches. Since copies had to be handwritten, copies were scarce. So the onus fell the more on the elders to teach the people and to defend the truth.

All in all, these factors made for a challenging workload for the elders, requiring of them to exercise an enormous amount of leadership. When the elders were in need of help in the early days, the apostles were the obvious source to turn to, for after all, they were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Even in their prison cells the apostles wrote letters of instruction and encouragement to the churches. However, in time the apostles all died, leaving the elders with the responsibility to lead the churches.

4.1.2 DEVELOPMENTS IN THE ELDERSHIP

These pressures on the elders in the early churches led to the following three developments:

4.1.2.1 Clergy versus Laity

In view of the pressures under which the elders had to function in the days of the early New Testament church, it's not surprising that it was the more gifted and the more knowledgeable men who became 'the leaders amongst the leaders'; the one elder elevated above the other elder. The bulk of the workload landed on the shoulders of those who had the knowledge. Furthermore, due to a lack of knowledge on the part of individual believers at that time, the office of all believers didn't function at its optimum. Hence, over time there developed a division between the office-bearers (the clergy) and the common people (the laity); a division between the more learned, particularly the ministers, and those who were not so knowledgeable.

Here I take the liberty to insert a word of admonition. Let each one of us be aware that this division between 'clergy' and 'laity', between the 'knowledgeable' and the 'less knowledgeable' can easily develop again. Though the membership in the Free Reformed churches in Australia today tend to be rather well read and informed, we need to ensure that we never let our clergy become leaders of dumb sheep, simply because they are the only ones who have the knowledge and we haven't made it our business to stay informed and to think through on the issues that be. It is the duty of us all as individual believers to constantly be busy with the study of the Bible, the Confessions and the history of the Church.

4.1.2.2 Elevation of Ministers

The apostles appointed elders in every church (cf Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). In I Timothy 5:17 a distinction is made between "*elders who rule*" and "*those who labour in the word and doctrine*". (See Section 2.2 above.) The "elders who rule" are known to us as 'elders', while "those who labour in the word and doctrine" are known to us as 'ministers'.

On account of the pressures described above, the focus over time came to rest primarily on the teaching elder, the minister, so that he was publicly perceived as having a place above his colleagues, the ruling elders. Factors that contributed to this elevation include:

- a. the minister tends to be the public face and voice of a congregation;
- b. in the face of heresies it is usually the minister who has the books and the knowledge required to defend Scripture;
- c. in times of persecution the minister is often the first person to be arrested, causing people to respect and honour him for his suffering for Christ's sake.

Eventually the term 'elder' vanished in the churches, and the minister alone received the title of Bishop; the minister was regarded as 'THE elder'. This led to what is called 'Dominocracy' ('domino' = minister, 'cracy' = to rule).

4.1.2.3 Hierarchical Church Government

Over time the extent of the bishop's authority broadened. Not only was the bishop 'the' ruler of the church in his own town but he also became the ruler over the leaders (later known as priests) of the churches in the smaller, neighbouring towns. In due time a country was divided up into several diocese which all fell under the jurisdiction of the one bishop. So it became unlawful for bishops to be appointed in the smaller towns; the smaller towns had to be satisfied with a priest, who in turn had to report to his superior in the big town, the bishop.

The bishop of Rome eventually became the strongest of all bishops, and by 400 A.D. his position on the top of the ecclesiastical ladder was commonly acknowledged. That the bishop of Rome ended up on top of the ecclesiastical ladder is explained by the following factors:

- a. Rome was for years the capital city of the empire, and so
 - people were used to receiving instructions from Rome, and
 - those of Rome were used to giving instructions
- a. when the empire fell to Alaric in 410, the bishop of Rome was much involved in preventing widespread destruction. So he had the respect required to fill something of the vacuum left by the collapse of the emperor's authority.

So we see how the church ended up with an authority structure of priests, prelates, cardinals, bishops and Pope where it was the Pope who ruled the entire western world, down to the priests at the bottom of the ladder who ruled over the village church. The church, after a period of about 400 years, had adopted for itself the authority structure of the secular political and economic system of the time, namely, a graded organisation of authority.

Although we can appreciate the enormous pressures under which the apostles and elders had to labour in the days of the early Christian Church, we yet need to bear in mind that this hierarchical system of church government was not the way to alleviate these pressures. Scripture had not been the guide in seeking the answers needed. Although the Pope appealed (though wrongly so) to Christ's words of Matthew 16:18 in defence of the authority he claimed, he failed to reconcile this with what God has revealed elsewhere in His Word concerning the authority of the office-bearers in the local churches.

4.1.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF PAPAL CHURCH GOVERNMENT

The following characteristics need to be mentioned:

- a. Papal church government is Monarchical: ‘mono’ = one; ‘archo’ = rule. The Pope is the sole ruler.
- b. Papal church government embraces the notion of one, large ‘universal’ church made up of smaller member churches. Because the papal view of the church is first of all ‘catholic’ or ‘universal’ (instead of seeing each local church as complete in itself), the authority structure naturally became hierarchical.
- c. The authority of the Bible is replaced by the authority of one man: the Pope. The first Vatican Council of 1871 declared the Pope’s word to be infallible.
- d. The office of all believers is not upheld. In the Roman Catholic Church one does not need to know the Bible; to be saved one need only believe that the church’s faith is correct.

4.2 Lutheran Church Government

4.2.1 REJECTION OF PAPAL AUTHORITY

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg. In one of these statements Luther denied that the Pope was the Head of the Church. Thereby he threw overboard the Papal system of church government.

As a result of Luther’s rejection of the papal system of church government, the Pope in Rome issued Luther with a statement of excommunication. Luther had been expelled from the church. Luther expressed his appreciation for the Pope’s decision by publicly burning the excommunication document on December 10th, 1520. In so doing he reiterated his rejection of the Pope and Papal church government.

4.2.2 REPLACEMENT BY A NEW AUTHORITY STRUCTURE

Luther’s refusal to submit to the Pope as the head of the church was scripturally correct. Christ alone is Head and this is what Luther tried to reflect in the system of church government he saw to be the scriptural alternative to the papal system. Luther took seriously the office of all believers. He had learned from the Bible that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit made all believers partakers in the anointing of Christ. This means that each believer lives in a bond of faith with Christ, and so has been anointed to the threefold task of prophet, priest and king. So each individual believer must be involved in preaching, in serving others within the communion of saints, and in fighting against Satan’s attacks on himself and his fellow saints. Luther sought to incorporate the reality of the office of all believers into the system of government he wanted for the church.

However, the system of church government Luther had in mind did not find its way into the church due to the economic circumstances in Germany in 1525. Thousands of serfs, (i.e. the poor who owned no land) revolted against the rich landowners on whose land they lived and worked. The serfs rejected the authority of those over them, but could not in turn develop fitting authority structures to replace the ones thrown overboard. The resulting chaos demanded leadership from the very persons against whom the serfs had revolted in the first place.

This authority of the ruling class in secular society found its way into Lutheran churches as well. Since government obviously could not be entrusted into the hands of the plain people, Lutheran churches ended up with a system of church government that included the secular government. That is, the secular government received the right to control affairs in the church, appointing ministers, elders, and deacons in communities and receiving the right to exercise church discipline. In various countries, the church even became a government department.

A man by the name of Erastus took this government-centred concept and fine-tuned it. Hence Lutheran church government is also known as Erastian church government or Erastianism.

The authority of the Pope, then, was replaced with the authority of the king. This king was not only the head of state but also the head of the Church. In the Church of England today, the reigning monarch is still officially the head of the church. The churches in Holland were also influenced by Erastianism. For about 200 years after the Synod of Dort, the government prevented synods coming together and this eventually resulted in the Secession of 1834.

4.2.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF LUTHERAN CHURCH GOVERNMENT

The following characteristics need to be mentioned:

- a. Lutheran church government is monarchical: ‘mono’ = one; ‘archo’ = rule. Not the Pope but the King is the sole ruler.
- b. Lutheran church government embraces the notion of a national church, formed along national boundaries. The local church has no authority.
- c. The office of all believers has no place.

4.3 Reformed / Presbyterian Church Government

4.3.1 MARTIN BUCER

As the Reformed faith gained acceptance in Europe, its influence also became evident in the sphere of church government. Much of the ground work must be attributed to a man by the name of Martin Bucer. Like Luther, his starting point too was the notion of the office of all believers. All believers, he learned from Scripture, are righteous in Christ and live in a bond of faith with Christ, partaking in Christ’s threefold office of prophet, priest and king. These believers though are not so many individuals but come together as a congregation, a church, and the Head of every church is Christ. As Head, Christ rules over His church. He rules by means of the office of all believers, but specifically through the elders.

Through the preaching of the Word the Holy Spirit works faith in the hearts of man, and Christ assigned the task of preaching to the elders. It is by the two keys – the preaching and church discipline– that the elders open and close the kingdom of heaven. The power of these two keys is given to the congregation (Matthew 18:17), but exercised by the elders. Christ appointed "*some... pastors and teachers for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ*" (Ephesians 4:11f). There, according to Bucer, lies the heart of Reformed Church Polity. Church Polity doesn’t serve the best interests of just one or a few men, as is the case in papal church government, but serves the pastoral purpose of ensuring that the congregation grows in Christ. Reformed Church Polity exists so that the congregation may receive Christ’s gifts of faith, righteousness and holiness. The elders have the authority to work with the two keys of the kingdom of heaven for the sake of the edification of the congregation.

4.3.2 JOHN CALVIN

John Calvin built his understanding of church government on what Bucer had learned from the Bible. Calvin too emphasised the office of all believers and that local believers form a church which Christ wants governed by office-bearers. The local, visible church is all important to the work of the Holy Spirit, for He works faith through the preaching and the preaching is delivered from each local pulpit. In the local church, then, the elders are to carry out the office that Jesus Christ has laid on their shoulders, namely, exercising the keys of the kingdom.

It is said that "Calvin checkmated the Pope with the pawn of the elder." What God requires of the elder is not riches, intellect, education, social standing or fluent speech. The only quality God has stipulated is FAITHFULNESS to Him. God is pleased to use the "pawn of the elder", the ‘little man’, in order to cultivate growth in His congregation. Only the man who knows the power of God is able to encourage people in their service of the Lord. This is the type of man God desires as leader in His church. In 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9 Paul lists the qualifications God looks for in men suited for service in the office. There we do not read that they need to be wise by worldly standards, nor that they need to be skilled speakers or debaters. These were prized qualities in the eyes of the Corinthians (cf 1 Corinthians

1:18-29). Rather, *".. a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God ... hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, **holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught**, that he may be able, **by sound doctrine**, both to exhort and convict those who contradict"* (cf Titus 1:5-9). It is the faithful man whom God calls to serve as elder. By the faithful labours of such 'little men', the Faith of the Bible could grow in Europe – and the power of the Pope be broken.

4.3.3 ELDER CENTRED

Reformed church government is known by the word Presbyterian, 'presbyter' being the Greek word for elder. In other words, Reformed church government is elder-centred church government. 1 Timothy 5:17 speaks of two kinds of elders (known to us as the 'minister' and the 'elder'), but the one does not have more authority than the other. (Characteristic of Reformed church polity is not the minister but the elder). Therefore let the elders speak up at Consistory meetings and Synods, let not the ministers make the decisions! At the same time, let the young men in the congregation prepare themselves for the office. God doesn't ask for a fluent speaker, a good reader, a university degree. All God asks for is men who are faithful to Him, who love Him, His Church and His work.

Ironically, the concept of church government which Calvin promoted did not get off the ground in Geneva where Calvin lived, but it was taken to France, the Netherlands, and Scotland. In these places a presbyterial form of church government received a prominent place in the church. Within the category of Reformed / Presbyterian church government we have the Church Order of Dort, which is part of the history of our churches, and also the Presbyterian form of Church Government. Both fit into the category of Reformed church government.

4.3.4 CHARACTERISTICS OF REFORMED CHURCH GOVERNMENT

The following characteristics need to be mentioned:

- a. Reformed Church government acknowledges that Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, and He rules His Church by the office-bearers, the elders.
- b. Reformed Church government emphasises first of the local church; i.e. the gathering of the saved in the community where the Holy Spirit works faith through the preaching.
- c. Reformed Church government recognises that all believers are mature Christians in that all have received the Holy Spirit and so all are equipped to carry out the office of all believers in the context of the congregation of which they are members.

4.4 Congregationalism

4.4.1 DEVELOPMENT

After the Reformation in the sixteenth century, Reformed Church Polity took hold in Scotland, including its basic characteristic emphasis on the office of all believers and on the church as local gathering. In the course of time (1640-60), however, there arose a group who did not appreciate the need for a bond of churches. They argued that the New Testament Scriptures neither prescribes a bond of churches nor tells us of congregations bound together by a super-structure as a classis or a synod. They preferred, then, to see each local church as independent from other churches in the neighbourhood. Each local church, they maintained, is responsible only to the Lord.

It is interesting to note that these independents did not insist on adherence to any confessions. The arguments mentioned earlier for developing a bond of churches (assisting each other in the preservation of the truth; see Section 3.3) were not appreciated by these people.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH GOVERNMENT

- a. Congregational church government virtually absolutises the office of all believers.
- b. Congregational church government stresses the local gathering to the exclusion of the fact that the

Lord gathers a universal church.

4.5 Collegialism

1. DEVELOPMENT

Collegial church government has its roots in the rise of humanism in the time of the Enlightenment. Christ's existence is denied, and so there is no Head of the church in heaven. The church, then, is not a heavenly work performed on earth; the church is rather a society of like-minded people, a religious club made up of spiritually interested folk.

In this understanding, it is evident that officebearers have no authority from heaven; whatever authority they have is given to them by the people of the church. Officebearers are no more than the peoples' representatives.

2. CHARACTERISTICS OF COLLEGIAL CHURCH GOVERNMENT

- a. Collegial church government recognises no authority from heaven, and so finds its authority base in the people themselves. As such, collegial church government is simply democracy.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

5. *Development Of Church Polity In The Netherlands*

The concept of church government gleaned by Bucer and Calvin from the pages of Holy Scripture found fertile soil in the reformed churches of Scotland, France and the Netherlands. Historical developments in France in the years after the Great Reformation virtually snuffed out the Reformed Churches in that country. Reformed church polity on the European continent, therefore, came to its own in the developments in the Netherlands. It's to this country, then, that we ought to turn to see continental reformed church polity in practice.

5.1 BACKGROUND HISTORY

On October 31, 1517 Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the church at Wittenberg and in so doing started the Reformation. The effects of Luther's work were not only evident in Wittenberg. Luther's reformatory work was influential throughout Germany and eventually affected church life throughout Europe. The Netherlands also benefited from Luther's work. However, agreement with the reformer's teachings often went at the cost of one's life. Already in 1523 the enmity of the devil against the truth of Scripture resulted in the first victims being burnt at the stake. Despite the persecution, though, the Lord saw to it that the good news of the gospel took root in the hearts of many in the Lowlands of North-west Europe. Yet in the passage of time it was not so much Luther's emphases that were embraced and believed, but Calvin's.

Guido deBres, at the age of about 24 years, came into contact with the Gospel in 1545 and became a believer. His choice for the gospel did not come at a cheap price, for the Netherlands were under Spanish rule and so the state religion was Roman Catholicism. Under the ruling hand of King Philip II of Spain persecution against the Protestants was intensely fierce during the 1550s. DeBres, as preacher of the Gospel, was compelled to do his work secretly; he worked underground and under a false name. In 1561 deBres completed his Confession and had it thrown over the wall of the regent's home. By so doing, DeBres wished to make clear to the king that the Protestants were not a group of radical upstarts. His aim in writing his Confession was *"to protest against this cruel oppression, and to prove to the persecutors that the adherents of the Reformed faith were no rebels, as was laid to their charge, but law-abiding citizens who professed the true Christian doctrine according to the Holy Scriptures"* (Book of Praise,

p.440).

Article 36 of the Belgic Confession serves to prove that deBres and all others who embraced the Reformed faith were not rebellious against the government. In this article deBres confessed what God's Word has to say about the place of the civil government in society, what its task is and how it must be honoured and respected by all. Writes deBres, *"Moreover, everyone – no matter of what quality, condition, or rank – ought to be subject to the civil officers, pay taxes, hold them in honour and respect, and obey them in all things which do not disagree with the Word of God"* (Book of Praise, p.470). That is quite a statement to make concerning a government at whose hands deBres and his fellow believers suffered such intense persecution. Disobedience to the civil authorities was only warranted when one was compelled to act contrary to the demands of Scripture.

God's demands in Scripture included also (deBres learned from reading God's Word) that God had given principles concerning how He wants His Church to be governed. Despite the intensity of the persecution and the dangers of living as reformed churches, deBres considered obedience to God on these points essential. So it was that he included the basic principles of church government in the Confession he prepared. We find deBres' thoughts on church government in Articles 30-32. Says deBres: *"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. By these means they preserve the true religion."* DeBres went on to confess what God revealed in His Word about how office-bearers receive their office. *"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"* (Article 31). Again: *"We believe that, although it is useful and good for those who govern the Church to establish a certain order to maintain the body of the Church, they must at all times watch that they do not deviate from what Christ, our only Master, has commanded"* (Article 32). Let us bear in mind that such church government was directly contrary to the wish of the authorities of deBres' day: it was not the congregation but the government who determined who would serve as priest in a town; ministers were not permitted to preach or teach, public worship was not permitted, elders could not bring home visits. Yet deBres saw need to confess what God revealed on the point – and to teach it to his congregations also.

In 1566 fanatical protestants set out to destroy the contents of Roman Catholic churches, particularly the images, pictures and altars. Numerous reformed people, also of deBres' own congregation, rushed into the streets to sing psalms, and gathered in the fields to hear the preaching of God's Word. This all prompted a reaction on the part of the authorities who came down with a very heavy hand. Many Protestants were imprisoned, including deBres himself. In 1567 he was hung on the gallows. As part of the same crackdown, the King a year later sent his general, Alva, into the Netherlands. This very able general crushed the House of Orange, Holland's royal house. Hundreds of thousands of people fled, to France, Germany, and England, forming refugee congregations in foreign cities as Wezel (Germany), Emden (Germany) and London (England). The Church suffered greatly and the churches in existence at the time came to be known as 'the churches under the cross' – they were a church persecuted, and a church scattered to wherever refuge could be found.

Here we have people relatively new to the Reformed faith. One would expect that in the above circumstances many would fall away from the Reformed Faith (and indeed, some did), and that survival would be uppermost in their minds. But that was not the case for the majority! Here we see the power of faith at work. If Christ is King, then the political situation of the day need not be cause for depression. With Christ on the throne the future need not be viewed as only dark. A general as Alva could rule the Netherlands with an iron fist. Yet the believers were confident that the Lord in His good time would let the Gospel flourish in their country. Despite the difficulty of their situation the brethren at the time were optimistic.

That is also why the brethren risked their lives to meet together in order develop Scripturally justifiable church government that could be put in place when the Lord granted freedom from persecution. It is a point most worth noting: the fathers did not consider ecclesiastical assemblies, i.e. classes or synods, to be

a 'pain in the neck' or a necessary evil. Even in time of persecution they considered such assemblies to be essential to the life of the church of Jesus Christ, so essential that they risked their lives to develop reformed church polity. The fathers knew it: the churches needed each other so very, very much.

5.2 THE CONVENT OF WEZEL, 1568

Directly after Alva crushed the Dutch royal house, a group of reformed brethren from the Netherlands met together in Wezel, Germany. (In Wezel there was freedom of religion, though Alva's spies were everywhere no doubt). This particular meeting was called 'The Convent of Wezel'. (The word 'convent' means to convene, to meet). It was not a classis or a synod, for it was not made up of delegates from the churches. Rather, it was a meeting which was the private initiative of interested individuals who set as their agenda the preparation of an official synod. They understood that in order to get a synod organised there first had to be a bond of churches and so they set out to organise this and worked together to lay down some principles as to how a bond of churches ought to function. In attendance were refugees from the Netherlands who had found shelter in the cities of Wezel (Germany), Emden (Germany), and London. Though driven from their homeland, they were motivated by love for God and His church to lay the ground work for reformed church government in the Netherlands.

To establish reformed church government, these brethren saw no need to 're-invent the wheel'. Calvin had already dealt with the matter in Geneva and wrote a Church Order entitled 'Ecclesiastical Ordinances'. The brothers in Wezel used these Ordinances as a blueprint for their work. However, rather than just accept these Ecclesiastical Ordinances on the merit of Calvin's authorship (Reformed as he was in his thinking), the brothers saw it as their responsibility to see if Calvin's work could be improved upon in any way. So they developed Calvin's work further. This action in itself is interesting in relation to Reformed Church Polity. Important as Calvin's contribution (and Bucer's too) is to reformed church government, 'Reformed' is not so much 'Calvinistic' as 'Scriptural', and therefore always needs to consider the question "what does God want of us?"

The brothers in Wezel, then, made improvements to Calvin's Ecclesiastical Ordinances. In as much as we stand here at the cradle of Dutch church polity, we may consider Wezel's changes to be essential principles of continental reformed church government.

5.2.1 PRINCIPLE 1 OF REFORMED CHURCH POLITY: NO LORDING OVER OTHERS

Present at the Convent of Wezel was a gentleman belonging to the refugee church in London, by name of Moded. This Moded had been sent by London to Geneva, to seek advice in a matter of difficulty in that congregation. The matter of difficulty related to the minister; Rev vanWingen of the London church was an inflexibly dominant character. The brothers present at the Convent of Wezel read Jesus' words in Matthew 23:8: *"But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren."* (The word 'teacher' in the above quote denotes a leader or master.) The implication was surely that in a church of Jesus Christ there is no room for domineering; a minister is not to lord over another minister, nor a minister over consistory, nor consistory over consistory, nor elder over elder, etc. Rather, all officebearers have a place directly under Christ, and so one officebearer needs to respect the other. Those present at the Convent of Wezel recognised this to be a Scriptural principle basic to healthy church life, and so penned an Article One for their Church Order: *"No church shall in any way lord it over other churches, no office-bearer over other office-bearers."* Reformed church polity serves to protect congregations and consistories from domineering individuals.

Over the years, this principle has moved from the beginning of the Church Order to the end (it's Article 80 of our Church Order), but this change in location in no way belittles its importance. It has been placed at the end because this is where it fits best in view of the overall structure of the Church Order.

5.2.2 PRINCIPLE 2 OF REFORMED CHURCH POLITY: THE NEED FOR ECCLESIASTICAL ASSEMBLIES

A second principle which Wezel underlined was that the churches need to meet regularly. Under 3.3 we

have already examined the doctrinal basis for churches federating together and interacting with each other within a bond. There is, however, also a practical justification for federating together and interacting in a bond. For regular interaction between the churches by means of assemblies serves to prevent both hierarchy and independentism. Rev vanWingen's congregation in London was rather isolated from the other churches, and such isolation can give a minister opportunity to lord it over his consistory. If churches in a bond don't meet with each other there is also a very real tendency for each to go its own way in matters such as liturgy, policies in relation to church discipline, beliefs. Churches within a bond have a very real need to meet together and to discuss things, for after all, don't they all serve the one Lord, and shouldn't they therefore also be united in the way in which they serve Him?

The article adopted by the Convent of Wezel reads as follows:

"since ... it shall be most beneficial to achieve and maintain uniform agreement in doctrine as well as in regulating ceremonies and discipline, we consider that, as much as possible, frequent meetings of neighbouring churches ought to be organised. So that each arising item can be discussed at such meetings, we consider that all efforts must be made to divide the various Dutch provinces into fixed classes. In this way each church will know with whom she must interact and consult about the more important matters which, by her judgment, affect the common interest."

It is intriguing that the fathers at Wezel expressed a desirability for the churches to meet together "frequently". In fact, the articles of the Church Order they adopted, specify that churches in a local area ought to meet as often as once every three months; such frequent meetings would promote "uniform agreement in doctrine as well as in regulating ceremonies and discipline," and so counter hierarchy and independentism. We need to note that this goal was expressed in an environment of persecution, and in a time when distances were generally covered by foot. Contrast that to the context of our church life: we enjoy freedom of religion and have the conveniences of road and air travel available to us. Yet as churches we meet together only once every two years! On this point we have deviated far from what the fathers advised. As a result we face a spirit of independentism amongst our churches and the differences between the churches of our bond are real. When all is said and done, this is a self-inflicted problem. Let us meet together much more often, and when we meet let us spend our time talking first of all about matters relating to work within the bond of churches. Let it be fixed in our minds: each church within the bond needs the others.

Notice too that the fathers did not leave it up to the individual churches to decide with whom each might meet and talk and so cross-fertilise. "Fixed classes", said the fathers, ought to be formed, so that "*each church will know with whom she must interact and consult.*" The churches had one Lord, one faith, one hope, and so each church must feel comfortable to speak with the neighbouring church – even if there were differences in emphases. In this way, too, uniformity "in doctrine as well as in regulating ceremonies and discipline" would be achieved and maintained.

5.3 FROM WEZEL TO EMDEN

Marnix of St Aldegonde, a man of royal blood who had quite a standing in government circles, worked underground to free the Netherlands from the Spaniards. This man was Reformed in his thinking, and scriptural in his love for the Lord and the brethren. He saw that by the grace of God the Netherlands would one day be free, and that the churches had to be ready for that event.

By his judgment, it was imperative that there be adequate preachers of the gospel available to make the most of the window of opportunity that would arise in the day of freedom. But to train capable men required the combined effort of the churches. Similarly, Marnix was convinced that since there is one Lord and one faith, the people of the land need to be united in their belief and consequently the churches should also be unified in doctrine, church discipline, liturgy and ceremonies. In order to achieve this, Marnix saw that it was of paramount importance that the churches meet and discuss together – a Synod was required. Marnix, therefore, did what he could to encourage the growth of a bond of churches.

At this time already, though, two lines of thinking existed with regard to church polity. On the one hand

there was a group of liberally minded people who favoured Erastian (government-centred) church polity. This group (they became the eventual supporters of Arminian theology) saw no need for churches to form federations. Rather, if guidance was required by a church, it should turn to the government. On the other hand there was also a desire for Reformed (elder-centred) church polity. Marnix was convinced that the Reformed line was the correct direction for the churches to take and to that end he encouraged the convening of a synod in Emden.

5.4 THE SYNOD OF EMDEN, 1571

The first General Synod of all the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands was held, not in the Netherlands, but in Germany, in the town of Emden, in 1571. This synod was held outside of Holland, because persecution was still a very real thing. However, despite the dangers of meeting together, the fathers did so in obedience to the Lord and in recognition of their need for each other. The churches sent delegates to Emden to meet together in order to assist each other as churches and to defend themselves against heresy. There they officially formed a bond of churches.

One would expect that at this first official meeting of the churches, the churches would busy themselves immediately with matters pertaining to church polity. It is striking that instead their first item of business was that each delegate (and in them each church) made a point of expressing agreement with the Belgic Confession. Note: to date the Belgic Confession had been accepted by various churches on their own accord, but not by the churches altogether; this was the first meeting of the churches together. The fathers recognised the need for a confession, not just for churches individually, but also as a bond of churches. After all, what essentially binds churches together? It is the one faith which God has worked in the hearts of His people; faith in the one Gospel of salvation through the one Saviour Jesus Christ. This unity of faith required expression before a Church Order could be finalised. And a Church Order in turn could not be remote from the Confession of the Churches, but had to be built upon that Confession.

After the churches together came to agreement on what their one common faith was, the fathers moved on to develop a model for Church life. The Synod of Emden built on the work done in Wezel, as well as the experiences and decisions of the French churches. The French churches, we should know, had not suffered much persecution during the 1560s, and so had opportunity at a number of synods to develop a church order. This concept was the best Church Order the Synod of Emden could find, and so it was used as a basis and model for Emden's Church Order. Just like the Convent of Wezel, so too the Synod of Emden made it their business to modify this model in order to spell out for themselves principles of Reformed Church Government. For example, an article about no lording over others (not found in the French Church Order) received pride of place in Emden's Order. A second article notated the need for agreement with the common confession. Further, Emden changed the repeated use of the word 'church' in the French Church Order to the plural 'churches' – thus providing a Scriptural corrective to the widespread idea that the local churches were but chapters of the one big, real church.

The Synod of Emden also adopted another article, which reads, *"These articles, which regard the lawful order of the church, have been adopted with common accord. If the interest of the churches demands such, they may and ought to be changed, augmented or diminished. However no consistory or classis shall be permitted to do so, but they shall endeavour diligently to observe the provisions of this Church Order as long as they have not been changed by synod."* This article too points up how the fathers treasured Reformed thinking. Churches promise to accept decisions of Synod not because some higher body made them, but rather because the churches themselves in Synod made the decisions "with common accord", ie, together.

5.5 THE SYNOD OF DORT, 1618/19

Persecution in the Netherlands ended in 1572. Thereafter, church life developed rather quickly. After the Synod of Emden the churches held their synods on Dutch soil: there were two synods in Dort: 1574 and 1578, followed by a synod in Middelburg in 1581, in 'sGravenhage in 1586. Various of these Synods built farther on the work done by Wezel and Emden. Essentially, though, the Church Order stayed much the same over the years as that adopted by the Synod of Emden. The Synod of Dort 1618/19, after having

dealt with the heresies of Arminianism, worked on the Church Order that had developed so far, and adopted a version that has become known as the Church Order of Dort. Our federation of churches in Australia has adopted this edition from Dort. The 1994 Synod of Byford finalised a restructuring of its articles (in new translation) in order to adapt it to the Australian situation. In principle though, our Church Order is the equivalent of the Church Order of Dort – and hence is rooted in the work done in Wezel and in Emden.