

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

Principles and Practice of Reformed Church Polity

"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."

During the course of 1998 when Rev C Bouwman was minister of the Church of Kelmscott

he conducted a fortnightly Post-Confession class in which he dealt with the "*Principles and Practice of Reformed Church Polity*." What follows are the notes taken by one of the "students".

A revised/improved book form edition of these notes entitled "*Spiritual Order for the Church*" is available from [Premier Printing](#) in Winnipeg.

[Articles 1 - 15](#)

[Articles 16 - 27](#)

[Articles 28 - 50](#)

[Articles 51 - 68](#)

[Articles 69 - 79](#)

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE OF REFORMED CHURCH POLITY

THE CHURCH ORDER OF DORT

Articles 1-15

The Church Order commences with an article about its Purpose and Division. Article 1 reads,

For the maintenance of good order in the church of Christ it is necessary to have:

I offices and supervision of doctrine;

II assemblies;

III worship, sacraments and ceremonies, and

IV discipline.

What follows below is a thematic discussion of the articles contained in the above divisions. Since classes have not yet been formed in the bond of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, the 1994 Synod of Byford adapted some of the articles in order to make allowance for this situation. These adaptations are printed in italics in the text of the Church Order of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia as published in 1995. When an article of the Church Order is quoted in the notes that follow, where applicable, the adaptation to suit the present situation in Australia will appear in a footnote.

1 Offices and Supervision of Doctrine

1.1 The offices

Article 2 tells us that *"The offices are those of the minister of the Word, of the elder, and of the deacon."*

This article echoes Article 30 of the Belgic Confession. (The Belgic Confession was written by Guido deBres in 1561 and adopted shortly thereafter by the churches as a faithful summary of the teaching of Scripture.) In Article 30 we confess, *"We believe that this true Church must be governed according to the Spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in His Word. There should be **ministers** or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; there should also be **elders and deacons** who, together with the pastors, form the council of the Church."* Article 31 also makes confession concerning three offices: *"We believe that **ministers** of God's Word, **elders**, and **deacons** ought to be chosen to their offices by lawful election of the Church"* Both what is confessed in Articles 30 & 31 of the Belgic Confession, and what the fathers stipulated in Article 2 of the Church Order, is material drawn from Scripture. Each of the three offices specified are explicitly mentioned in the following Scripture texts:

1.1.1 Elders

Ephesians 4:11: *"And (Christ) himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some **pastors and teachers**."*

The offices of apostles, preachers, and evangelists were temporary offices used by the Lord in the founding years of the New Testament Church. However, in the span of one generation these offices ceased. The office which continued, and by which the Lord is pleased to rule His Church today, is described here with the phrase "pastors and teachers" (see Section 2.2 above).

The phrase "pastors and teachers" describes the office of elder. That is evident, for example, from Paul's words to the elders of the Church at Ephesus. *"From Miletus he (Paul) sent to Ephesus and called for the **elders** of the church"* (verse 17). He encouraged them to their work with these words: *"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). The word translated here as "to shepherd" is the same word as is translated in Ephesians 4 by "pastors". The point is that elders are pastors, pastors are elders.

This office is in mind in other passages of the New Testament where reference is made to the elders. For example:

- Acts 14:23: Concerning Paul and Barnabas who were returning from a missionary journey it is recorded, *"So when they had appointed **elders** in every church...."*
- Acts 15:2-4: *"Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and **elders**, about this question.... And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the **elders**"*
- Acts 21:17,18: Concerning the situation in the church at Jerusalem we read, *"And when we had come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, **and all the elders were present.**"*

1.1.1.1 Teaching elders and ruling elders

The task of elders to shepherd God's church can be divided into two areas of responsibility, namely teaching and ruling. Although all elders teach and rule, for some elders their main responsibility is to rule (these are the persons we call 'elders') while for others it is to teach (these are the persons we call

'ministers'). This distinction is derived from 1 Timothy 5:17 where one reads, "*Let the **elders who rule** well be counted worthy of double honour, **especially those who labour in the word and doctrine.***" These two areas of responsibility can also be found in Hebrews 13:7: "*Remember those **who rule** over you, **who have spoken the word of God** to you"*

1.1.2 Deacons

Deacons receive a mention in a couple of places in the New Testament.

- Philippians 1:1: "... *To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops (=overseers, elders) and **deacons.***"
- 1 Timothy 3:8-13: Having listed the qualifications necessary for service in the office of elder in the verses 1-7, Paul continues in verse 8, "*Likewise **deacons** must be ...*" followed by a similar list of qualifications necessary for service in the office of deacon.

NOTE: In order to be complete it must be noted that when the Church Order of Dort was formulated at the Synod of Dort, Article 2 actually stipulated four offices. The fourth office was that of 'doctor'; here was not meant a person trained in the medical profession, but a person who, as the Latin origin of the word suggests, is 'learned' and therefore able to teach. The fathers included this fourth office on the basis of what is written in 2 Timothy 2:2 where one reads, "*And the things that you have heard from me (Paul) among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men **who will be able to teach others also.***" The fathers understood this to be a command to appoint teachers (i.e. professors of theology), beside the ministers, whose task it is to teach the next generation of ministers. However, over time it was agreed that this fourth office was incorrectly derived from 2 Timothy 2:2. In the passage Paul instructs Timothy to train the next generation of ministers, but such a command to train others to be ministers does not give to Timothy a special office as 'doctor' or 'professor of theology'.

With regard to the training of ministers, the Church Order sees this as a task given to ministers, be it that it is "*an extraordinary task.*" Article 12 stipulates, "*If a minister accepts a call or an appointment to an extraordinary task the nature of the relationship between him and the church to which he is bound must be arranged with the consent of the classis. **Some ministers may be appointed for the training of students for the ministry, others may be called for mission work.***" The professors of theology engaged in this task at the theological colleges of our churches are ministers who have been appointed as professors by the churches, and so "called to an extraordinary task." They remain ministers and can continue to perform the tasks of the ministry, i.e. they may still preach and administer the sacraments.

2 The Calling to Office

2.1 Who calls to office?

How does a person become an office-bearer? Who calls a person to office? It is God who calls. God did so in the past, and He continues to do so today. The Old Testament prophets were called to office by God. Concerning the prophet Jeremiah one reads in Jeremiah 1:4,5: "*Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; Before you were born I sanctified you; **And I ordained you a prophet to the nations.**" Then said I: "Ah, Lord GOD! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a youth." But the LORD said to me: "Do not say, 'I am a youth', for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and whatever I command you, you shall speak."* Admittedly, Jeremiah's case was very special, but it serves well to illustrate that it is God who calls to office. Jeremiah himself did not choose to become a prophet. Moses, Gideon, Samson, Samuel, Saul, David, and Isaiah all serve as other examples of men who were very obviously called by God to a particular office amongst God's people.

That God calls to office is drawn out forcibly in Hebrews 5:4. Concerning the office of high priest one reads, "*And no man takes this honour to himself, **but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was.***" The

one who is called becomes the high priest. Verse 5 continues that for Christ it was no different. "So also Christ did not glorify himself to become high priest, but it was **he** (God) who said to him: "You are my Son, today I have begotten you." God made Christ an Office-bearer. The same is true of the elders of Ephesus. To them Paul said, "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 ..." (Acts 20:28).

Office-bearers, then, receive their office from the Head of the Church. That is why no man is permitted to elbow his way into the office, nor is any to push his friend into the office. The principle that it is God who gives the office is reflected in Article 3.A.:

*No one shall take any office upon himself without having been lawfully **called** thereto. The **calling** to office shall take place by*

2.2 How is a person called to office?

2.2.1 In Old Testament times God called directly

How does God call persons to office? In the Old Testament God called many to office by a direct approach. The next high priest in line was the oldest son of the high priest currently in office. God Himself determined who the oldest son of Aaron was. Hence it was God Himself Who called Eliezer (Aaron's oldest son) to office. So it was with the prophets; God called them. The quote mentioned above in relation to Jeremiah serves as an example. The disciples were very directly called to their office by the Lord Jesus.

2.2.2 In New Testament times God calls indirectly

□ Through the congregation's involvement

In New Testament times God's approach is not as direct. Though it is still God who calls, He does so more indirectly, placing responsibility for this task upon the congregation. Acts 1:15-26 serves to illustrate the congregation's involvement in calling brothers to office. The Lord Jesus had appointed 12 disciples. But with Judas having committed suicide after Jesus' arrest, a vacancy existed. One does not read that Peter or the others said anything to the effect that they wanted Matthias to replace Judas. Rather, Peter approached the congregation and sought their assistance in filling the vacancy. In verse 23 we read, "And **they proposed** two: Joseph called Barsabas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias." It is unclear who is meant in this passage by 'they', but the context suggests that it was the congregation under the leadership of Peter and the other 10 disciples. "And **they prayed** and said, "You, O Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which of these two you have chosen to take part in this ministry and apostleship And **they cast their lots**, and the lot fell on Matthias. And he was numbered with the eleven apostles" (Verses 24-26). The congregation was involved, possibly in proposing the candidates and certainly in praying. Then "they" cast lots, and the term 'they' in this instance certainly includes the involvement of the congregation. But it was God who called to office, for "the lot is cast into the lap, **but its every decision is from the LORD**" (Proverbs 16:33).

A second example of God calling a person to office through the involvement of the congregation can be found in Acts 6. One reads in verse 1 that the number of disciples was increasing but that the widows were being neglected. Consequently, the twelve apostles called together the whole congregation and charged them, "brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation ..." (verses 2-4). "And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And **they chose Stephen**, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, **whom they set before the apostles**; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them" (verses 5,6). These seven men were called to office by God through the involvement of the congregation. The congregation had a role to play in their appointment.

In Acts 14:23 we read of Paul and Barnabas appointing elders: "So when they had appointed elders in

every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." The word "appointed" means literally "elect by raising hands". Although our translation does not seem to suggest the congregation's involvement in the appointment of the elders, the use of the word 'appoint' does suggest the congregations direct involvement.

The above material finds an echo in the Church Order, where the manner of calling to office is described in Article 3.A as follows:

The calling to office shall take place by the consistory with the deacons, with the cooperation of the congregation, after prayer, and in accordance with the local regulations adopted for that purpose.

The reference to "local regulations" refers to minor items as what to do with blank votes, what percentage of congregation members constitutes a quorum, what length of time a brother should serve or be free from being nominated again, etc. Each local church is free to make "local regulations" on points as these.

□ **Through the congregation's prayers**

The passages quoted above from Acts 1, Acts 6 and Acts 14 all make mention of prayer as a critical step in the calling procedure. This need for prayer was considered so important that Guido deBres included the element in the *Belgic Confession*. He wrote in Article 31:

*"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...."*

Here recognition is given to the fact that it is ultimately God who calls to office, and the congregation forms the tool by which God shows the man of His choosing. In the Church Order this same directive received specific mention in the election procedure described in Article 3.A:

*The calling to office shall take place by the consistory with the deacons, with the cooperation of the congregation, **after prayer**, and in accordance with the local regulations adopted for that purpose.*

□ **Further details**

Article 3.B. goes on to give some guidelines for the calling of elders and deacons. Just as in Acts 1, the consistory requests the congregation to submit names of brothers considered suitable to serve in the offices of elder or deacon. Although there was only one vacancy to be filled in Acts 1, two names were nominated: Barnabas and Matthias. Although the option is there for "*twice as many candidates as there are vacancies to be filled*" this is not imperative. In Acts 6 seven men were to be nominated for the office of deacon; seven were chosen and set before the apostles. After prayer, these seven were appointed as deacons. Hence the stipulation of the Church Order:

*"The consistory with the deacons shall present to the congregation **at the most** twice as many candidates as there are vacancies to be filled."*

The exact number of nominees, then, may vary, so that where four vacancies exist the consistory may nominate any number from a minimum of four brothers to a maximum of eight. From this number, the congregation may choose.

Yet, when all is said and done, it is not the congregation who calls to office. It remains God who calls. When a person becomes an office-bearer he, in his affirmative response to the questions put to him at his ordination, must be able to say in so many words that he is convinced "*that God Himself, through His congregation, has called (him) to (his) office*" (see the Form for Ordination of Elders and Deacons,

Book of Praise, p. 632). This is the first question asked of a brother at his ordination. The conviction that it is God who calls is what makes the office so serious. Equally, this conviction makes the office glorious and bearable. If God calls to office, He also gives the strength to serve in that office, and this service is indeed a most beautiful task.

2.3 Who is eligible to be called to office?

2.3.1 Eligibility for the offices of elder and deacon

The church is the Lord's. So it is God Himself Who determines who is eligible to be called to office in His church. The following comes to light:

- In 1 Timothy 3 the apostle Paul writes to Timothy concerning the qualifications of elders and deacons. Concerning the elder, Paul is moved by God to stipulate that he

"must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil" (vss 2ff).

- Likewise, in his letter to Titus, Paul says of the elder that he must be

"blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but 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" (1:6ff).

- Concerning the men who had to "serve tables" in the congregation of Jerusalem, the apostles stipulated that they had to be

"men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business" (Acts 6:3).

- In I Timothy 3 Paul writes that

"deacons must be reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money, holding the mystery of the faith with a pure conscience. But let these also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons, being found blameless. Likewise their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things. Let deacons be the husbands of one wife, ruling their children and their own houses well. For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus" (vss 8ff).

These Scriptural criteria are echoed in the Church Order with the term "suitable". Says Article 3.B:

*The consistory with the deacons shall give the congregation the opportunity to draw the attention of the consistory to brothers deemed **suitable** for the respective offices.*

When, therefore, the consistory requests the congregation to nominate brothers "deemed suitable" to

serve in the offices of elder or deacon, the members need to work with Bible passages such as these. Nominations need to be substantiated, not just with a statement that a brother meets the qualities listed in the above passages, but with an explanation as to how the brother meets these qualities. If a brother is known not meet the above qualifications, no consistory has the right to nominate that brother, and no member the right to vote for him, simply because God Himself has declared this brother unsuitable for office in His church.

It is also deliberate that the Church Order specifies that the congregation has opportunity to draw the attention of the consistory to brothers. This is because the Lord has been pleased to close the office in His church to the sisters of the congregation – even though in His eyes they are as precious as any brother. This is the Lord's word in a passage as 1 Timothy 2:12:

*"Let a woman learn in silence with all submission. **And I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man**, but to be in silence."*

Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 14:34 Paul is moved by the Lord's Spirit to write,

*"Let your women **keep silent in the churches**, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says."*

In passages as these, the Lord instructs us unambiguously that He does not deem the sisters of the congregation eligible to serve as office-bearers.

2.3.2 Eligibility for the Ministry

A minister, like elders and deacons, must meet the qualities listed in passages as 1 Timothy 3. However, the Scriptures indicate that a minister needs more qualifications still. In 1 Timothy 3, Paul mentions that an elder must be "*able to teach*." The term translates the Greek word 'didactic', and means exactly what it says. But in 2 Timothy 2:2, where Paul instructs Timothy to train young men for the office of minister of the Word, Paul describes the required faithful men in terms that are somewhat stronger. These young men, says Paul (in our translation), need to "*be able to teach others also*." Though it does not come through in the translation, Paul uses here a term that means "fit, appropriate, competent, qualified, able". These future ministers, then, need to be qualified, made competent, trained to handle the Word of God so that they are specifically equipped to teach others.

Further, these future ministers had to be "*faithful men*". That is, they were to be trustworthy, dependable persons, in whose hands the gospel of Jesus Christ was safe. Given that the office of minister is a highly influential office (for a minister preaches from the pulpit every Sunday, teaches Catechism to the youth, leads consistory meetings, visits the members' homes, etc) it is certainly important that these future ministers be "*faithful*". This is the more important since, as Paul also notes (cf 2 Timothy 2:25; 4:3,4), there are those who oppose the gospel.

These data from Scripture are reflected in the Church Order when it broaches the question of eligibility for the ministry. Article 5.A stipulates the following concerning a person's eligibility for the ministry:

Eligibility

Only those shall be called to the office of minister of the Word who

- (1) have been declared eligible for call by the churches; or*
- (2) are already serving in that capacity in one of the churches; or*
- (3) have been declared eligible or are serving in one of the churches with which The Free Reformed Churches of Australia maintain a sister relationship. The churches shall observe the general ecclesiastical ordinances for the eligibility of those ministers who have served in these sister-churches.*

How though can one church within a bond of churches be confident that a minister of a sister church is eligible for call and service in its church? This is addressed by Article 5.B. There one reads:

Declared eligible

Only those shall be declared eligible for call within the churches who

(1) have passed a preparatory examination by the classis in which they live, which examination shall not take place unless those presenting themselves for it submit the necessary documents to prove that they are members in good standing of one of the churches and have successfully completed a course of study as required by the churches; or

(2) have satisfied the requirements of Article 8; or

(3) have satisfied the requirements of Article 9.

Article 5.B.1 speaks of a 'preparatory examination.' One cannot be given such an examination unless he satisfies two conditions.

- Firstly, he must prove, by way of an attestation from his consistory, to be an upright and God-fearing man. Here the Church Order echoes Paul's instruction to Timothy that those who would be ministers of the Word must be "*faithful*" men (2 Timothy 2:2).
- Secondly, he needs to have graduated with the appropriate academic qualifications from a theological college of one of our sister churches. With this requirement, the churches take seriously the instruction of Paul in the same text, that future ministers must be "*able to teach*," trained, qualified, made competent.

If a person can prove that he has met these two conditions, he can then undergo a preparatory examination by the classis. This examination requires a person to demonstrate his abilities in Old and New Testament exegesis, the preaching of a sermon and a sound knowledge of reformed doctrine. On successful completion of a preparatory examination the young man is declared eligible for call.

Article 5.B as quoted above indicates that there are two other ways by which a person may become eligible for call to the ministry of the Word. They are the following:

(2) have satisfied the requirements of Article 8; or

(3) have satisfied the requirements of Article 9.

Article 8 gives recognition to the fact that the Lord, sovereign as He is, can in His good pleasure provide ministers for His churches in non-ordinary ways. Normally spoken, the Lord moves the person whom He one day will call to the ministry to enrol at the Theological College. In the course of time, then, this young man is "qualified", trained to teach the Word to others. However, in His care for His churches, the Lord may grant exceptional gifts to a brother so that he is "qualified to teach" the Word to others without having gone through the formal course of studies associated with the training for the ministry. For such persons the door to the ministry is opened in the well-known "Article 8":

ARTICLE 8 - Exceptional gifts

Persons who have not pursued the regular course of theological study shall not be admitted to the ministry unless there is convincing evidence of their exceptional gifts of godliness, humility, modesty, good intellect, and discretion, as well as the gift of public speech. When any such person presents himself for the ministry, classis shall (with synod's prior approval) examine him, and upon a favourable outcome allow him, as candidate, to speak an edifying word in the churches of the classis for a set period of time. Thereafter the classis shall further deal with him as it shall deem edifying, observing the ecclesiastical regulations adopted for this purpose.

The Lord may also bring into the churches a man who has been minister in a bond of churches not recognised by the marks of Article 29, Belgic Confession. A minister from such a bond cannot straightaway be called to the ministry in the churches he joins. After all, God has stipulated that a minister must be known to be "*faithful*". Given that false teachers can easily appear (cf Acts 20:29f), it is important that such a person first undergo the test of time. Article 9 stipulates that, when he has been proven to be faithful, the door can be opened for him to become eligible for call to the ministry.

ARTICLE 9 - Admission of ministers who have recently joined the church

A minister of the Word who has recently joined one of the churches and originates from a church with which the churches do not maintain a sister relationship shall only be admitted to the ministry with great caution. He shall not be declared eligible for call within the churches unless he has been well tested for a reasonable period of time and carefully examined by the classis in whose area he lives. This classis examination shall be conducted with the cooperation of the deputies of synod.

2.3.2.1 Ordination and installation of ministers of the Word

Articles 6.A. and 6.B. stipulate the procedures to be followed for those who "*have not served in the ministry before*" and "*those who are serving in the ministry*" respectively.

□ those who have not served in the ministry before

Those who have not served in the ministry before need to be examined for a second time (they have already been once examined with a view to being made eligible for call; this exercise was called the preparatory examination. See above). The outcome of this second examination (called the "peremptory examination") is by no means a foregone conclusion – as if being declared eligible for call automatically ensures that one will also enter the ministry. Given the influence one has from the pulpit and in the work of the ministry at large, this final exam is necessary, and must be taken seriously.

A. Regarding those who have not served in the ministry before, the following shall be observed:

1. They shall be ordained only after classis has approved the call.

Classis shall approve the call

a. upon satisfactory testimony concerning the soundness of doctrine and conduct of the candidate, attested by the consistory of the church to which he belongs; and

b. following a peremptory examination of the candidate with satisfactory results. This classis examination shall take place with the cooperation and concurring advice of deputies of synod.

2. For the ordination they shall also show to the consistory good testimonials concerning their doctrine and conduct from the church(es) to which they have belonged since their preparatory examination.

Note the emphasis here on the candidate's responsibility to demonstrate to both classis and consistory that he is sound in doctrine and conduct. Here is the application of the principle of 2 Timothy 2:2, that the minister-elect must be "*faithful*".

As to the peremptory examination, the candidate is expected to show that he can make and deliver a sermon. Further, he must display competence in Old and New Testament exegesis, knowledge of the reformed confessions, doctrine of the church, church history, church polity, diaconology (i.e. the practical aspects of carrying out the office of the ministry: preaching, visiting the sick, teaching catechism), and ethics.

□ those who have served in the ministry before

A vacant congregation is not bound to call as minister only persons who have not yet served as minister. Such a congregation can also extend a call to a man who is already serving elsewhere. In the event that a call is accepted, the Church Order stipulates the following:

B. Regarding those who are serving in the ministry the following shall be observed:

They shall be installed after classis has approved the call.

1. For this approval as well as for the installation the minister shall show good testimonials concerning his doctrine and conduct, together with a declaration from the consistory with the deacons and from classis that he has been honourably discharged from his service in that church and classis, or from the church only in case he remains within the same classis.

2. For the approval of a call of those who are serving in one of the churches with which The Free Reformed Churches of Australia maintain a sister relationship a colloquium shall be required which will deal especially with the doctrine and polity of The Free Reformed Churches of Australia.

Notice again the application of the principle of 2 Timothy 2:2 regarding faithfulness.

Further, a competency examination is not required for established ministers because, essentially, a minister who carries out his office is regularly 'examined' by his consistory and congregation as he carries out the duties of his office.

For those who are already serving in the ministry in one of the sister churches, a colloquium (i.e. a learned discussion) is held concerning doctrine and church polity. This is because there can be differences between bonds of churches, spread as churches are over the face of the world, in differs cultures and differing traditions.

In Article 6.B.1 one reads that a minister in office, having accepted a call from another church, requires a "*declaration from the consistory with the deacons **and from classis** that he has been honourably discharged **from his service in that church and classis***" A classis is made up of a number of local churches (see Section 2 below, on Assemblies). Although a minister receives a call from a local church, by nature of his office he also has a role to play in the other churches within that classis. The task of a minister extends also into the bond of churches. For that reason classis gets involved in both the discharge of a serving minister and in the approval of a call to another minister. Classes, after all, want to be sure that the work of ministers within the classical resort is scripturally sound.

2.4 Duration of the call

In the church of Jesus Christ, it is Christ alone who calls to office. This reality in turn means that it is also Christ alone who can releases from office. It is understood that no-one is called by Christ to serve forever, for in this life all men must die, and by death their service in the office is terminated.

The Lord, though, sovereign as He is, can use less obvious means to make clear that an office bearer should no carry out his office. Yet, as the Lord used the congregation (through the consistory) to call to office, so also the congregation (in the consistory) must be involved when the time arises to depart from the office.

2.4.1 Minister

The principle that Christ alone can release from the office is captured in the Church Order by Article

15. There one reads,

A minister of the Word, once lawfully called, is bound to the service of the church for life and therefore not allowed to enter upon another vocation unless it be for exceptional and substantial reasons. The decision of his consistory to relieve him of his office in order to enter upon another vocation shall receive the approval of classis, with the concurring advice of deputies of synod.

A minister does well, then, when he accepts a call (to a given congregation), to be aware that he accepts it until the Lord releases him from that call. And Yes, the sovereign Head of the church is free to release a minister at any time of His choosing – be it from the church where the minister is currently serving, or even from the office altogether. The Church Order recognises the following possibilities:

□ A CALL FROM ANOTHER CHURCH (Article 7)

A minister can only move to a different congregation if he is called and if he has received the required consent. This possibility is captured in Article 7 as follows:

A minister once lawfully called shall not leave the church to which he is bound to take up the ministry elsewhere without the consent of his consistory with the deacons and the approval of classis. Likewise, no church shall receive him unless he has presented a proper certificate of release from the church and the classis where he served, or from the church only if he remains within the same classis.

In this instance the Head of the church calls His servant from the office He had given in one congregation to serve in the office in another congregation. He is released, then, from his office in the first congregation and installed into the office of Minister of the Word in his new congregation.

□ A CALL TO AN EXTRAORDINARY TASK (Article 12)

If a minister accepts a call or an appointment to an extraordinary task, the nature of the relationship between him and the church to which he is bound must be arranged with the consent of the classis. Some ministers may be appointed for the training of students for the ministry, others may be called for mission work.

One can be called out of the active ministry in a given congregation to serve as instructor at the Theological College or to serve as missionary on the mission field. In both these instances the person concerned remains a minister, but does not carry out the normal duties of a minister in his congregation. As such, the Lord who called to the task of instructor or missionary relieves the minister from the office he had earlier received in Christ's church.

The tasks of the instructor at the College and the Missionary will receive attention in Articles 17 and 19 respectively.

□ RETIREMENT (Article 13)

If a minister of the Word, by reason of age, sickness or otherwise, is rendered incapable of performing the duties of his office he shall retain the honour and title of minister of the Word. He shall also retain his official bond with the church which he served last, and this church shall provide honourably for his support. The same obligation exists towards a minister's widow and orphans.

The Head of the church can take away from one of His office bearers the gift of health and/or strength so that he is no longer able to carry out the office effectively. It is fitting that people recognise what the Head of the church does in their midst by taking away the health and/or strength of His office bearer,

and respond accordingly.

□ DISMISSAL (Article 14)

Christ gathers His church in a broken world. In fact, the ministers He calls to office are men very much touched by the fall into sin. And the members of the congregation also are very much touched by this fall. The renewing work of the Holy Spirit in no way undoes the effects of the fall altogether. The result is that the 'chemistry' between a minister and his congregation may be (or become) negative. It is possible, for example, that members of the congregation stumble over the minister's character so that his person gets between the pulpit and the pew. Then the minister, together with his consistory, needs to be sober and level-headed, and assess whether it may be more beneficial for the church of Jesus Christ that he request dismissal. This possibility is recognised in Article 14:

The consistory with the deacons shall not dismiss a minister from his bond with the congregation without approval of classis and the concurring advice of the deputies of synod.

Should a minister not receive a call after his dismissal, he could lose his office altogether. After all, there is no such thing as an office bearer-at-large, or an office bearer without a congregation.

□ DISCIPLINE

A final instance considered in the Church Order where the call of a minister is terminated is mentioned in Article 76:

If a minister, elder or deacon has committed a public or otherwise gross sin, or refuses to heed the admonitions by the consistory, he shall be suspended from office...

In this instance he is minister no longer.

2.4.2 Elders and deacons

Article 23 stipulates that the term of office for elders and deacons shall be as follows:

The elders and deacons shall serve two or more years according to local regulations, and a proportionate number shall retire each year. The places of the retiring office-bearers shall be taken by others unless the consistory with the deacons judges that the circumstances and the well-being of the church render it advisable to call them into office again. In that case the rule of Article 3 shall be observed.

Throughout church history 'term-eldership' versus 'life-time-eldership' has been a point of discussion. Those in favour of a life-time service in the office reason that if it is the Lord who calls a man to serve in the office, then who is man to say that a man is to serve for only a set number of years? Those in favour of term-eldership offer practical reasons for their position. It is healthy for a congregation to receive 'new blood' in the office on a regular basis. To have the same persons in office year after year can produce 'stale' brothers. Further, the realities of life are such that both the raising of a family and service in the office are demanding and time-consuming tasks. Fathers need to be available for their responsibilities towards their families too.

Term-eldership, as compared to life-time eldership, is anti-hierarchical. With a regular changeover of office-bearers, there is less danger of a few brothers lording it over the congregation. The prospects of having to be re-nominated and re-elected to office can also serve as a catalyst to brothers to do their best; in this way brothers remain accountable.

The Bible itself is vague on the matter of elders and deacons serving in the office for a term versus life.

Hence, if the Bible is not absolute, man should not be absolute about this matter either. In the Church Order we have agreed to the principle of term eldership. Presumably, the fathers judged term eldership the wiser way to go.

Of course, the Church Order's requirement for term eldership does not mean that Christ's call to office is suddenly ignored after the required two or three years is up. In an instance where the Lord in His Word does not specify directly what the Lord wishes, He uses also the practical arguments of daily living to bring into focus His will for church life.

2.5 Support for the office

If a man is called to full-time service in his office in Christ's church, how is he to receive his daily keep? On this point, the Lord gave particular instructions in His Word. In the Old Testament the people of Israel had to support the priests and the levites; they receive a portion of the people's sacrifices. The principle recurs in the New Testament, where Jesus says to the seventy that they weren't to go from house to house, but rather "*remain in the same house, eating and drinking such things as they give, for the labourer is worthy of his wages*" (Luke 10:7). Paul reminds the Corinthians that "*the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel*" (1 Corinthians 9:14). And the Galatians are told, "*Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches*" (6:6).

The fathers, on the basis of scriptural directives as these, considered it to be the privilege and responsibility of the congregation to support the brother who gives his time to her edification. Therefore, concerning ministers of the Word, Article 11 reads,

The consistory, with the deacons, on behalf of the congregation which it represents in this matter, shall provide for the proper support of its minister(s).

A minister is not paid wages. The money he receives should not be a reflection of the responsibilities of his job or the quality of his work. That is the principle by which people receive their respective wages in society. If a minister is 'in it' for the money, then he is in office for the wrong reason. It is a congregation's privilege to receive a minister who may devote himself full-time to the responsibilities of the office. Let the congregation, which benefits spiritually from the preaching and other work of its minister, in turn support him financially so that he and his family receive what they need to live.

In view of the fact that a minister is a minister for life, a congregation remains responsible for his support after retirement too, as well as responsible for the support of his widow and orphans. This is agreed in Article 13: after his retirement his church

shall provide honourably for his support. The same obligation exists towards a minister's widow and orphans.

Again, since instructors at the Theological College remain ministers,

the churches together are obliged to provide support for the professors of theology and for their widows and orphans (Article 17).

There is no reason why this principle of supporting those who give of their time to labour in the offices of the church cannot be applied to elders and deacons also. In a minor way we do this already when elders need to travel far afield in order to visit a family of the congregation, or if delegates need to be sent to a Synod; their time and expenses are paid for by the congregation. It could also be that a consistory sees a need for employing an elder to full-time pastoral work. In principle there is no reason against that. That this has not been allowed for in the Church Order is because historically elders and deacons have carried out their offices in their free time. It is our privilege to support not only the work of the ministers but also the work of the other offices, and therefore in principle Article 11 could also

be extended to the work of elders and deacons.

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE OF REFORMED CHURCH POLITY

THE CHURCH ORDER OF DORT

Articles 16-27

3 The Nature Of The Offices

3.1 ELDERS

In Scripture one finds the following references to the presence of elders in the New Testament church in its founding years:

Acts 11:27-30

Here one finds the first reference to elders in action in the church of the New Testament:

*"And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. This they also did, and sent it **to the elders** by the hands of Barnabas and Saul."*

This was not the first incidence of believers getting money together and handing it over to the church leaders for distribution. Acts 4:34-37 relates that the proceeds of the sale of land and houses were *"laid at the apostles' feet."* On comparing these two passages, though, one notices a development in church leadership. The apostles of Acts 4, after they had completed their task of instituting Christ's church in Jerusalem had moved on to preach the Word to the ends of the earth. Although the Lord has not revealed how the elders of Acts 11 received their office, it is clear that they took the place of the apostles in the leadership of the Jerusalem church. The elders represented as it were the public face, or the address, of the church at Jerusalem. It was to them that Saul and Barnabas handed over the gifts from the brothers in Antioch.

Acts 14:23

In the preceding chapters one reads of Paul and Barnabas preaching the gospel in Cyprus, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. From Derbe the apostles turned back to visit Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch in order to strengthen and encourage the believers. However, Paul and Barnabas could not continue indefinitely to visit and encourage the converts in these towns; they had other work to do. So we read in Acts 14:23, *"So when they had appointed **elders in every church**, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed."* Under the apostles' leadership churches were instituted in these cities and elders were appointed from the local membership to take over from the apostles the leadership of the local church.

Acts 20:17

*"From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for **the elders of the church**."*

From the context it is evident that these elders were the leaders of the church at Ephesus.

Acts 21:18

*"On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and **all the elders were present.**"*

Paul went to discuss matters with James in Jerusalem. That the elders were also present points up that these brothers were seen as the leaders of the congregation.

In the above texts Scripture calls the leaders of the churches *elders*. Although the word *elder* denotes a person of older age, it is not so much their age as their *responsibility in giving leadership* that is stressed by the term. Having been appointed as elders, these men, in their person and conduct, became role models in their congregations. Importance was attached to them not on account of their age but on account of their office.

3.1.1 THE NATURE OF THE ELDERS' WORK

3.1.1.1 OVERSEER

In Acts 20:28 one reads of the term 'overseer' (Greek: episkopos) being connected to the office of elder. Says Paul to the elders of the church at Ephesus, *"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**"* What then is an overseer to do? One finds the answer in Acts 15:36 where one reads, *"Then after some days Paul said to Barnabas, **Let us now go back and visit our brethren in every city where we have preached the word of the Lord, and see how they are doing.**"* Although the word 'visit' is used in our translation, the original word means to 'oversee'. Paul says as it were, "Let us go and oversee our brethren." The apostle's intent, then, is to go and keep his eyes open to learn how the brethren are doing. This, then, is the meaning of the English term 'oversee'. It means to have oversight, to see or keep an eye on how things are going.

One also finds the word in Matthew 25:36. Jesus tells the parable of the separation between the sheep and the goats. Christ, the shepherd, will say to the sheep gathered at his right hand, *"I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you **visited me**...."* Here again, the Greek word is 'oversee'. In the context of Jesus' parable the purpose of the visit is not simply to go and see someone. Rather, the visit is an expression of care and genuine interest. So, in their task as overseers, the elders are to visit the members of the congregation. The purpose of such visits is not just to socialise, but rather, with a genuine interest in the members' well-being, to find out what they are up against in life, seeking to stand beside them, to encourage, and if necessary, to admonish.

3.1.1.2 SHEPHERD

This title appears repeatedly in John 10 as a description of Jesus. The Lord says in verse 11, *"I am the good shepherd"* (Greek: poimen). The Lord goes on to describe what He as shepherd does for His sheep: *"**The good shepherd gives his life for the sheep.**"* In contrast to this, the Lord describes what the hireling does: *"... he who is a hireling and not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep"* (vs 12). The shepherd cares for his sheep, and so he does what he can to defend and protect them, even going so far as laying down his life for the sheep. Hebrews 13:20 also describes the Lord Jesus as *"... **that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant.**"* Jesus, the Good Shepherd, shed His blood so that His sheep might live. In 1 Peter 2:25 likewise, one reads of Jesus the Shepherd: *"For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the **Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.**"*

The task of shepherding is not the task of our Lord Jesus Christ exclusively. In Scripture one reads how the role of shepherd is also assigned to the office of elder. In Acts 20:28 Paul says to the elders of the church at 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."* Here the word 'shepherd' appears as a verb. It is the elders' task to shepherd the flock for which Christ has laid down His life. It is in the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd as He is described in John 10, that the elder finds his role model.

The Old Testament too uses the term 'shepherd' in relation to the Lord, and in so doing expounds further the elder's task of shepherding according to the model of the Good Shepherd. The psalmist confesses in Psalm 23 that *"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want."* Why shall he not want? Because the Lord, shepherd that He is

"makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over" (Psalm 23:2-5).

Over against the way the Good Shepherd carries out His office, there is the way of the hireling of John 10 who, in the interest of his own well-being, leaves the sheep to fend for themselves in the face of danger. The prophet Ezekiel had to admonish the shepherds of Israel for the irresponsible manner in which they shepherded the flock of Israel:

"Thus says the Lord God to the shepherds: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock. The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and on every high hill; yes, My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and no one was seeking or searching for them" (Ezekiel 34:2-6).

The shepherds in Israel were not shepherding as true shepherds.

The elders of Ephesus were to shepherd their flock, following in the footsteps of their Good Shepherd. Paul did not command them to be shepherds in order to build up their own reputation or to make the congregation do what they wanted them to do. The flock was not there for the benefit of the elders, but the elders for the benefit of the flock. The elders are even to "lay down their life" for the flock, for that is what the Good Shepherd did. In order to preserve the life of their sheep the elders are to *"feed them in good pasture ... (to) seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick"* (Ezekiel 34:14-16). Paul, listing in Ephesians 4:11 the various offices that Christ gave to the church, uses for 'elder' the word 'pastor' (=shepherd): *"And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some **pastors** and teachers."* Pastor is an apt synonym for elder, for it captures well the elder's task of shepherding, feeding the sheep.

3.1.1.3 STEWARD

In Titus 1:5-9 Paul enumerates the qualifications of elders. Paul writes to Timothy, *"For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint **elders** in every city as I commanded you."* In this quote (vs 5) Paul uses the word 'elder' (Greek: presbyter), but in verse 7 he uses for 'elder' the word 'overseer' (or 'bishop'; Greek: episkopos). Then he says concerning the bishops / elders that he *"must be blameless, as a **steward** of God ..."* (Greek: oikonomos). Matthew 24:45 draws for us a picture of what a steward is and does. In His parable concerning the faithful and evil servant Jesus says, *"Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made **ruler over his household, to give them food in due season?"*** The word translate here as 'ruler' is the word used by Paul and translated as 'steward'. This is the person who is responsible for managing a household, a servant appointed to care for the other servants (even providing their food) and who is accountable to his master.

Paul likens the elder to a steward: a person 'over the household' and yet under God and so accountable

to Him. For what purpose does God make the elder a steward over His congregation? Not for the elder's own benefit, but so that he may give the congregation "*food in due season.*" The elder, then, serves the congregation with the possessions God has entrusted to him for the benefit of the congregation.

3.1.1.4. LEADER

In Hebrews 13:7,17 & 24 the apostle gives the following instruction to the Hebrews, "*Remember those who **rule** over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.... Obey those who **rule** over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account... Greet all those who **rule** over you, and all the saints.*" The word translated here as 'rule' (Greek: hegoumonos) is properly the word 'lead', and this is spoken of here in relation to the elders. Characteristic of a leader is that he gives a proper example to those whom he leads; he guides. Again, the elder does not lead for his own benefit, but for the benefit of the congregation ("*for they watch out for your souls*"). Given this task of the leaders, the Hebrew saints are instructed to submit to the elders; it is in their best interest to follow the leadership of their elders.

3.1.1.5 IN SUM: ELDERS MUST USE THE WORD OF GOD

Elders must oversee, shepherd, be stewards over and lead their congregation for the sole purpose of directing the congregation to God. For that reason God has also given the elders the One Resource they need to perform these tasks, and that resource is of course the Word of God. If the elder must shepherd the sheep, feeding them in good pasture, he must feed them in the Word of life. But before an elder can begin to shepherd, or even to lead, oversee or manage His Master's flock, he himself must be spiritually healthy. To use the words of Titus 1:9, an elder must "(hold) **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.**" For an elder to be an elder in the scriptural sense of the word, it is imperative that he himself stands by that Word and be "*able to teach*" that Word (1 Timothy 3:2). How can an elder oversee, visit, feed, rule, show care and stand beside people in their circumstances if he is unable to teach what God's Word has to say to them in their need?

3.1.2 THE TASK OF THE ELDERS

3.1.2.1 TEACHING ELDERS -- FOCUS ON PREACHING

On the basis of 1 Timothy 5:17 we may speak of two kinds of elders: the teaching elder (the office of the ministry) and the ruling elder (the office of elder). All elders, be they teaching or ruling elders, are overseers, shepherds, stewards and leaders. But teaching elders and ruling elders carry out these tasks with their own particular focus.

The minister's task very much focuses on teaching and preaching, or, to use the words of 1 Timothy 5:17, he "*labours in the word and doctrine.*" How does the minister oversee, shepherd, and lead his congregation, managing over the congregation so that it gets "*food in due season*"? He does so specifically by the preaching. Timothy, for example, was a minister of the Word. How can Timothy be the minister God wants him to be? Paul is moved by the Holy Spirit to write to Timothy like this: "*I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ ... **Preach the word!***" (2 Timothy 4:1,2). If Timothy is to be a shepherd of the people of God, then he needs to preach; preaching is critical to the task of the minister. The office of Minister of the Word had also been entrusted to Titus. Paul writes to him also, "*But as for you, **speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine ... likewise exhort ...***" (Titus 2:1,6).

Preaching is of prime importance in shepherding God's flock because it is by the preaching of the gospel that the Lord works faith in the hearts of His people. As Paul wrote in Romans 10:17, "*So then **faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.***" Through faith in Jesus Christ one is reconciled to God, and this reconciling faith is worked by the Spirit through the preaching. So Paul can even call preaching the "*ministry of reconciliation*" (2 Corinthians 5:18). A minister, on the pulpit and

when he visits, is a steward of the revelation of God by which he leads and feeds the flock, teaching, encouraging and admonishing.

In addition to preaching, a minister fulfils his tasks of being an overseer, a shepherd, a steward and a leader for his flock by the means of prayer. Acts 6:4 serves to illustrate what priority prayer receives in the work of the minister. A problem had arisen in the church at Jerusalem, a complaint by the Hellenists against the Hebrews, which warranted the apostles appointing seven men chosen by the congregation to attend to the matter. These seven men were needed so that the apostles could give themselves "*continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.*" It is interesting to note how this text first speaks of prayer and then preaching.

In Article 16 of the Church Order the fathers made an effort to summarise what they gleaned from Scripture into a brief task description for ministers:

ARTICLE 16 - Task of ministers

The task of ministers is to faithfully lead in prayer, preach the Word and administer the sacraments. They shall watch over their fellow office-bearers and over the congregation. Together with the elders they shall exercise church discipline and see to it that everything is done decently and in good order.

A minister's task receives a changed emphasis when he receives a special mandate, such as specified in Article 12: "*Some ministers may be appointed for the training of students for the ministry, others may be called for mission work.*" However, a missionary remains a minister, and performs on the mission field the same duties as a minister. On the mission field too, lost sinners are saved through hearing the gospel of reconciliation through Christ. For that reason a missionary's focal task is also the preaching of the Word. Hence, in describing the task of missionaries, the fathers wrote:

ARTICLE 19 - Task of missionaries

When ministers of the Word are sent out as missionaries, they shall in the specific region assigned to them proclaim the Word of God, administer the sacraments to those who have come to the profession of their faith, teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded His church, and ordain elders and deacons when this appears feasible, according to the rules given in the Word of God.

3.1.2.2 RULING ELDERS – FOCUS ON GOVERNING

The terms overseer, shepherd, steward, leader also apply to the office of the ruling elder. However, the description of the task of the ruling elder is given a different emphasis in Article 20. There one reads:

ARTICLE 20 - Task of elders

The elders shall together with the ministers of the Word govern the congregation with pastoral care and discipline. For the upbuilding of the congregation they shall make homevisits as often as is profitable but at least once a year. They shall watch that their fellow office-bearers are faithful in carrying out their duties and ensure that in the congregation everything is done decently and in good order.

Here the task of governing is emphasised. After all, 1 Timothy 5:17 speaks of the elders "*who rule.*" The focus is pastoral care and discipline. As overseers the elders make it their business to visit the members for they cannot build up, nourish, instruct, encourage or admonish the members appropriately with the Word unless they know what the members' particular needs are. Hence the fathers stipulated that it is the task of the elders to make homevisits as often as possible. Article 20 is an attempt of the fathers to formulate a brief task description for the elders, based on what they gleaned from Scripture. More detail can be found in the Form for ordination of elders and deacons.

3.1.2.3 MINISTERS AND ELDERS MUST WARD OFF FALSE DOCTRINES

It has pleased God to save a people for Himself through the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross. This gospel comes to the world through the ministry of the church (1 Timothy 3:15; 4:6). That is why the apostle Paul instructs Timothy to "*guard what was committed to your trust*" (1 Timothy 6:20).

But this gospel is desperately hated by the evil one. He, therefore, does what he can to distort the gospel. The apostle Paul already wrote of "*false apostles, deceitful workers*" who "*transform themselves into apostles of Christ*" (2 Corinthians 11:13). He adds that these deceitful works imitate Satan, who "*transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness*" (2 Corinthians 11:15).

Paul warns the Ephesian elders of the challenges they will meet as they carry out their office. These challenges, says Paul, include the need to deal with heresies. Said Paul to the elders:

"... 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. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch..." (Acts 20:28-31).

Paul was qualified to instruct the elders of Ephesus, for he himself had performed the tasks of an elder. He taught and proclaimed, publicly and via homevisits (cf vs 20), the gospel of reconciliation for the purpose of working repentance and faith in his listeners. It was a dangerous task for Paul, but no chains or tribulations were going to stand in the way of him fulfilling the office to which God had called him. Following in the footsteps of the Good Shepherd, Paul was prepared to carry out his office at the expense of his own life. Even false teachers and heretics would not silence the apostle. He dared even to confront Peter publicly about his errors (cf Galatians 2:11) and publicly also to expose the heresy of the Judaizers (Galatians 3). Here was an example the elders of Ephesus had to follow.

If God's people, then, are to be fed in the good pastures of the Word, ministers and elders alike must both be on guard for false doctrines which aim to undermine God's Word and so mislead His people. This task of warding off false doctrines is captured in the Church Order as follows:

ARTICLE 26 - False doctrine

To ward off false doctrines and errors the ministers and elders shall use the means of instruction, of refutation, of warning and of admonition, in the ministry of the Word as well as in Christian teaching and family visiting.

3.1.3 PRESERVATION OF THE ELDERS' DOCTRINAL INTEGRITY

Due to the influential nature of the office, it is imperative that the men who are ordained to office are faithful men. Paul's warning to the elders at Ephesus concerning impending attacks on Christ's church are equally valid for all office-bearers today. In order to be able to guard the flock against attacks from 'wolves' from without and heretics from within, office-bearers must themselves be sound in faith. In accordance with Titus 1:9 and 2:1 an office-bearer must be "... **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...**", and he is to "... **speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine: ... sound in faith**" Amongst the office-bearers there is no room for deviation from the Word of God. Therefore, upon their ordination, in accordance with Articles 24 and 25 of the Church Order, all office-bearers sign a form in which they promise to hold fast, teach and defend God's faithful Word. Articles 24 and 25 read as follows:

ARTICLE 24 - Subscription to the Confession by ministers and teaching staff

All ministers of the Word and all teaching staff at the theological seminary shall subscribe to the Three Forms of Unity of The Free Reformed Churches of Australia by signing the Form(s) adopted for that purpose. Anyone refusing to subscribe in that manner shall not be ordained or installed in office. Anyone who, being in office, refuses

to do so shall because of that very fact be immediately suspended from office by the consistory, and classis shall not receive him. If he obstinately persists in his refusal he shall be deposed from office.

ARTICLE 25 - Subscription to the Confession by elders and deacons

Elders and deacons shall also subscribe to these Three Forms of Unity by signing the Form adopted for that purpose. Anyone being in office who refuses to do so shall because of that very fact be immediately suspended from office by the consistory. If he obstinately persists in his refusal he shall be deposed from office.

The forms referred to in Articles 24 and 25, which ministers, elders, and deacons are required to sign, are the "Subscription Form for Ministers of the Word" and the "Subscription Form for Elders and Deacons" respectively. These two forms are very similar in their wording. "The Subscription Form for Ministers of the Word" reads as follows:

SUBSCRIPTION FORM FOR MINISTERS OF THE WORD

- 1. We, ministers of the Word in the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, signatories to this Subscription Form, sincerely, solemnly, and with a good conscience before the Lord, declare by our signature that we wholeheartedly believe and are fully convinced that all articles and points of doctrine contained in the three Forms of Unity, namely the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort, are in full agreement with the Word of God.*
- 2. We promise therefore that we will diligently teach and faithfully defend the aforesaid doctrine, without either directly or indirectly contradicting the same in our public preaching or writing. We also promise not only to earnestly reject all errors which conflict with the aforesaid doctrine, but that we shall at all times be willing to refute and contradict them, doing our utmost in reproving, combating, and helping to resist such errors.*
- 3. Should at any time in the future reservations regarding the said doctrine arise in our minds we faithfully promise not to propose, teach, or defend them, neither in our preaching nor in our writing, publicly nor privately, but to first disclose these reservations to the ecclesiastical assemblies in the ecclesiastical way so that they may examine them.*
- 4. Furthermore, we promise that we will always be prepared to submit ourselves willingly to the judgement of the ecclesiastical assemblies. Should we refuse to submit ourselves to the judgement of the ecclesiastical assemblies or should we persist in our reservations we agree by that very fact to be suspended from our office.*
- 5. Moreover, should the consistory, the classis church, or synod at any time upon sufficient grounds and in order to preserve the uniformity and purity of the true doctrine deem it necessary to require of us a further explanation of our opinion regarding any part of the said doctrine, we promise always to be willing and ready to comply with such a request, upon the understanding that by the very fact of our refusal we will be suspended from our office. However, we reserve for ourselves the right of appeal should we believe ourselves aggrieved by the judgement of the consistory or classis church.*

Until such a decision is made upon such an appeal we will submit to the determination and judgement of the consistory and/or classis church.

In Christ's church there is no room for any office-bearer who teaches any doctrine not in full accord with the Word revealed in Scripture. Any office-bearer refusing to sign the Subscription Form, or who by word or deed gives the lie to his signature, will be suspended from the office to which he has been called. The church is the Lord's and therefore it is His Word alone, the only Truth, which must prevail, and so be defended.

3.1.3 SOUND TEACHING AND DEFENCE OF THE WORD REQUIRES SOUND TRAINING

The office of elder, be it in a teaching or in a ruling capacity, is a position of great influence. Just as a flock of sheep is in danger of being scattered when led by a false shepherd, so a congregation is in

danger of being deceived and misled when led by a false teacher. Owing to the influence an elder has as overseer, shepherd, steward and leader, it is imperative that the elder abides by the faithful word of God. That was also Paul's instruction to Titus. A bishop must be someone "...**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**" (Titus 1:9).

The elder who wishes to teach must himself be taught. Timothy, a young assistant who had accompanied Paul quite extensively on his missionary journeys, had been charged by Paul to take charge of affairs in the church at Ephesus. Paul knew the situation in this congregation, and so wrote Timothy words of advice and encouragement. Paul knew that fierce wolves would seek to infiltrate the flock (Acts 20:29). So elders had to be equipped to recognise error and fight it. So Paul's instruction to the local minister was this: "...*the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, **commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also***" (2 Timothy 2:2). Timothy was to find for himself in Ephesus faithful men, men who met the qualifications of office-bearers as listed in 1 Timothy 3, and then teach them all that he had learnt from Paul. These men would in turn pass on this teaching to other faithful men who would serve after them.

3.1.3.1 TRAINING FOR THE MINISTRY

This instruction to train a new generation of elders receives practical content in Theological Colleges for the training to the ministry. The need for such training is recognised in Article 17 of the Church Order:

"The churches shall support or, if possible, maintain an institution for the training for the ministry."

The Australian Free Reformed Churches support the Theological College of the Canadian Reformed Churches in Hamilton.

The training is carried out by professors of theology, who remain ministers of the Word but who have accepted "*a call or an appointment to an extraordinary task.*" In this case they are ministers who have been "*appointed for the training of students for the ministry*" (Article 12). The professors of theology are responsible for training the next generation of ministers (2 Timothy 2:2). They are to train men to be the overseers, shepherds, stewards and leaders that God wants them to be, capable of fulfilling the task of a minister as described in Article 16:

"...to faithfully lead in prayer, preach the Word and administer the sacraments. They shall watch over their fellow office-bearers and over the congregation. Together with the elders they shall exercise church discipline and see to it that everything is done decently and in good order."

To that end the professors are to

"expound the Holy Scriptures and to defend the sound doctrine against heresies and errors, so that the churches may be provided with ministers of the Word who are able to fulfil the duties of their office as these have been described above" (Article 17).

Since the theological college is a part of church life, the churches are to see to it that the College is provided with suitable professors, and that these professors are provided for. Therefore Article 17, like Articles 11 and 13, concludes,

The churches together are obliged to provide properly for the professors of theology and for their widows and orphans."

Since the churches need ministers, the theological colleges need more than just professors of theology; they need students too! Therefore *"the churches shall strive to ensure that there are students of theology, extending financial aid where necessary"* (Article 18). The churches: that is to say, the members of the congregations are to be on the lookout for likely men who show signs of having the talents required to become ministers of the Word, to encourage them to pursue this path, and if necessary, offer them financial support.

3.1.3.2 TRAINING FOR THE ELDERSHIP

The churches have adopted no formal training course to prepare potential ruling elders for their office. This is not because training is not necessary. Rather, Paul's instruction in 2 Timothy 2:2 is satisfied with respect to potential ruling elders in a different manner than for teaching elders. The preaching of the gospel and the normal appetite of the spiritually healthy brother (encouraged, no doubt, by an equally spiritually healthy spouse) prompt study and reflection on the Word of God and the issues that live in the churches. It should be noted too that the qualifications for eldership listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 do not include a degree of formal study.

3.2 DEACONS

1. TO SERVE THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

In 1 Corinthians 12 the apostle Paul describes the congregation at Corinth as a body: *"Now you are the body of Christ"* and all the Corinthian believers are *"members individually"* (1 Corinthians 12:27). In order to impress upon the Corinthians how important each individual believer is for the proper functioning of the congregation as a whole, Paul compares the spiritual body of Christ to the physical body of man. The human body too is the sum total of all its members, each member having its unique contribution to the well-being of the whole body.

*"The body is not one member but many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body", is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the smelling be? But now **God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased.** And if they were all one member, where would the body be? But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we think to be less honourable, on these we bestow greater honour; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honour to that part which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with it."*

Now, the body of Christ functions no differently than the human body in that all the members individually make up one whole, and all the members need each other. So Paul concludes,

"Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually" (1 Corinthians 12:14-27)

This reality described here by the apostle was evident in the way the believers in Acts 2 interacted with each other.

"And they (the Christian converts) continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.... Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the

temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:42-47).

These people realised that as a group they were united into one body through their shared faith in Christ, and they expressed this unity in deeds that sought each other's benefit.

The same can be found in Acts 4:32. Just as a body made up of many members has only one heart and one soul, so it was with the body of believers in Jerusalem:

*"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.**"*

This is the direct result of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone works the unity of His body, the church:

*"Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfil my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, **being of one accord, of one mind.** 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" (Philippians 2:1-4).*

Paul urges the Philippians to be 'other-minded' instead of 'self-minded'. To be 'other-minded' means total self-emptying for the benefit of the other and it is only Christ's example of willing and total self-emptying for our sakes which motivates us to imitate Him. Says Paul, drawing our attention to Christ,

"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:5-8).

Therefore, it remains for each of us to do the same: to give of ourselves for the benefit of the other. Just as the hand comes round to scratch the shoulder that itches, so let the able member come round to assist the member in need. Captured in the above Scripture texts is the whole notion of the 'communion of saints'.

The first few chapters of Acts give a most positive account of how the believers gave concrete expression to their shared faith and unity in Christ. See the texts quoted above from Acts 2 and Acts 4. In the same chapters one reads of great numbers of people coming to faith. Acts 1:15 records 120 persons; on the day of Pentecost about 3000 souls were added (Acts 2:41). In Acts 4:4 one reads that the number of men alone totalled 5 000 to which *"believers were added increasingly ... multitudes of both men and women."* Hence by the time one gets to Acts 6 one could guess that there may well have been a sizeable congregation of some 20,000 people.

Based on what one reads in Acts 6, it becomes apparent that as the church grew in numbers it became increasingly difficult to let the communion of saints function effectively. A complaint had arisen; there was something wrong within the communion of saints. *"Now in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplying, there arose a murmuring against the Hebrews by the Hellenists, because their widows were neglected in the daily distribution"* (Acts 6:1). There were some Greek speaking widows who were being overlooked in some way – either they were not given food or they were not involved in the work of distribution. Whatever the details of the problem may have been, the limitations of this life caused the body to malfunction. That things would operate well within the

communion of saints numbering some 20,000 people was simply more than the twelve apostles could supervise. The problem was compounded by language barriers.

How were the apostles to address this problem? Recognising the importance of devoting themselves totally to the ministry of reconciliation, that being THE way by which they were to bring people to faith, the apostles came up with the following solution: "*Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word"* (Acts 6:2-4). If the apostles had to involve themselves in the actual functioning of the communion of saints, they would have to do so at the cost of their real work. So they appointed and ordained seven men to the office of deacon. The seven men are not called 'deacons' in so many words, but their task description ("*serve tables*") captures the work characterising the deacon; he *serves*. The Greek word 'serve' is simply the verbal form of the noun deacon; these seven men had to *deacon the tables*.

Altogether we need to conclude that the deacons' role is to ensure that the communion of saints functions the way it should.

3.2.2 THE TASKS OF THE DEACONS

Reference is made to the office of deacon per se in two other places of Scripture. In Philippians 1:1 one reads, "*To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and **deacons***", and in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 Paul enumerates the qualifications of deacons. Although one cannot draw up a task description for the office of deacon on the basis of these texts, one can work with what one reads in Acts 6 and Scripture's emphasis on the church functioning as one body of which all are members individually. This requires organisation, and here lies the responsibility of the deacons.

This comes out in Article 21 where the fathers described the task of the deacons as follows:

ARTICLE 21 - Task of deacons

The deacons shall perform the ministry of mercy. They shall acquaint themselves with difficulties; visit, help and encourage where there is need; and urge church members to render assistance where necessary. They shall collect and manage the gifts of the congregation, and after mutual consultation distribute them where there is need. The deacons shall give account of their policies and management to the consistory.

The deacons' ministry is described here as the ministry of mercy: letting people taste the mercy of God. To that end deacons help and encourage the members of the congregation as is needed. However, in order to know the needs and give the appropriate support, the deacons need to go into the congregation and visit the members.

One should be no more surprised at seeing a deacon at the door as seeing an elder come to pay a visit. Although the collection and distribution of money seems to constitute the profile of the deacon's task (for that is what we all see them do in church), that is only a part of the ministry of mercy. A more important duty of the deacons is to make sure that the communion of saints functions well. Deacon visits to all members are to serve the twofold purpose of ascertaining whether there are any needs at that address which requiring assistance as well as ascertaining whether there are gifts at that address which might be of assistance to others in need. Deacons ask the members, then, if they are well cared for via the communion of saints or if perhaps they are lonely, poor or hungry. They also inquire whether the members are readily using their gifts for the benefit and well-being of other members of the body. For the sake of a healthy communion of saints, the members do well to receive the deacons heartily and respond to their queries openly.

Yet the proper functioning of the communion of saints ultimately depends not on the deacons but on spontaneity amongst the saints. Just as the foot cannot but willingly co-operate with the leg, so

likewise I need not wait for instructions from a deacon to go and help a person in need. It is when spontaneity does not cover a need that the deacons must get involved. That does not mean that the deacons have to do all the assisting themselves. If the deacons have become the 'Mr Fix-its' of the congregation, then the communion of saints is sick. The deacon's main task is not so much giving assistance as ensuring that the members are willingly assisting each other, and if not, stimulating them to do so.

4 THE PLACE OF THE OFFICES

Where are office bearers to carry out their task? There is one place only, and that is in the place where Christ has put him. Where has Christ stationed the office-bearer? Unlike the apostles, who received a place of authority in all the early Christian churches, be it in Jerusalem, Corinth or Thessalonica, office-bearers today do not have such an extensive authority. Rather, office bearers have authority only in the local congregation where they were called to office. This is scriptural:

Titus 1:5

Paul instructs Titus to "*appoint elders in every city.*" Titus was not to appoint elders for the whole island of Crete, but instead in each city. The inference is that each city has its own elders. The elders of the church in *yonder* city, then, are not to carry out their office in the church of *this* city.

Acts 14:23

"*So when they had appointed elders in every church*" Again, Paul and Barnabas did not appoint regional office-bearers but local office-bearers. Each church had its own elders.

Revelation 2,3

"*To the angel of the church of Ephesus write ... And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write ... And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write*"

The term 'angel' means literally 'messenger'. Each church had its own angel or messenger. This is understood to be the teaching elder, the minister who opens the Word. It is striking that John is not instructed to write a letter to one angel in charge of several churches but individual letters to the angels of seven different churches.

An office-bearer's work, then, is locally directed. This principle comes back in the Church Order. A minister has no right to demand access to the pulpit in another church. "*No one shall preach the Word or administer the sacraments in another church **without the permission of the consistory of that church***" (Article 10). An elder does not have authority within various congregations but is ordained to office in one congregation, and hence his authority extends no further than that congregation. Therefore Article 20, in describing the task of elders, speaks of the congregation, in the singular: "*The elders shall together with the ministers of the Word govern **the congregation** with pastoral care and discipline.*" The deacons likewise, in performing the ministry of mercy, do not collect gifts from several congregations, nor do they have any authority over the distribution of gifts collected in other congregations. "*They shall collect and manage the gifts of **the congregation** ...*" (Article 21).

5. EQUALITY OF THE OFFICES

The twelve disciples shared equal status; there was no pecking order among them. Said Christ to them, "*But you, do not be called 'Rabbi': for one is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren.... And do not be called teachers; for one is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted*" (Matthew 23:8-12). In like manner, ministers, elders and deacons share equal authority, and as much as possible share the duties between them equally. Although a minister usually has the duty of

chairing a consistory meeting, that gives him no more authority in the meeting than any other office-bearer. This concept is captured in the Church Order in Article 20 in the description of the task of elders. The elders govern the congregation together with the minister; they share equal responsibility in this. "*The elders shall **together** with the ministers of the Word **govern** the congregation with pastoral care and discipline.... They shall watch that their **fellow office-bearers** are faithful in carrying out their duties*" (Article 20). The equality of the offices is more specifically stated in Article 22 which reads as follows:

ARTICLE 22 - Equality of respective duties

In the local congregation equality shall be maintained among the ministers, among the elders, and among the deacons, regarding their respective duties, and in other matters, as much as possible.

6. THE OFFICES AND THE GOVERNMENT

With relation to the civil government, the Church Order has formulated the following article:

ARTICLE 27 - Office-bearers and the government

The office-bearers shall impress upon the congregation its obligation to be obedient and show respect to the government, because God has instituted it. They must set a good example in this regard and by means of proper communication invoke the government to protect the ministry of the church.

The fathers recognised, on the basis of Scripture, that office-bearers have received from the Lord an instruction to lay before the congregation the need to obey the authorities of the land. Via His servant Paul, God instructs us in His Word:

"Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practises evil. Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience's sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour" (Romans 13:1-7).

Titus too was to remind those under his charge to "*be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey ...*" (Titus 3:1). Not only must the authorities be obeyed, but they also require our prayers: "*Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence*" (1 Timothy 2:1,2).

Office-bearers are therefore to set good examples, living as good and honourable citizens of their country and urging the government to serve the protection and best interests of the ministry of the church. The fathers deemed it correct that this aspect of the office bearers work receive a mention in the Church Order.

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE OF REFORMED CHURCH POLITY

THE CHURCH ORDER OF DORT

Articles 28-50

II. ASSEMBLIES

Article 28 stipulates that:

"Three kinds of ecclesiastical assemblies shall be maintained: the consistory, the classis, and the synod."

1. DEVELOPMENT OF ASSEMBLIES IN AUSTRALIA

The Church Order adopted by the Free Reformed Churches of Australia is a historical document put together some 400 years ago in a setting markedly different from the situation in Australia today. At the time of the Synod of Dort, there were hundreds of churches in the bond of Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. So a structure of multiple assemblies (including, beside consistory, classis and general synod also a regional synod) was very possible.

For more than 30 years after the institution of the first Free Reformed Church in Australia in 1951, there were but three churches in the Australian bond. This small number made it impossible to implement the various levels of assemblies mentioned in the Church Order of Dort. Consequently, the fathers deleted any references in the Church Order to a regional synod, and contented themselves with two ecclesiastical assemblies in practice: the consistory and the synod. The hope was that, under the blessing of the Lord, the number of churches within the bond would grow to such numbers that one day classes could be included in church life.

In expectation of the day that the bond of churches would be large enough to include classes, the fathers at the first synods of the Free Reformed Churches retained in their Church Order numerous references to classes. In what follows, I will attempt to explain the Church Order as it has been adopted. The reader needs to bear in mind that the reality has not (yet) caught up with the ideal outlined in the Church Order. A paragraph at the end of this section on Assemblies offers an outline of how church life in fact works in our midst without classes. The footnotes provide the text of the Church Order that is in force until classes have been formed.

2. LEGITIMACY OF THE ASSEMBLIES

It is the Lord's will that each church has a consistory. In Scripture we read how, during the founding years of the New Testament church, the apostles Paul and Barnabas returned to the cities where they had earlier preached the Gospel in order to appoint "*elders in every church*" (Acts 14:23). Note the plural; each church received more than one elder. Similarly, in Acts 20:17 we read that Paul sent from Miletus for the elders of Ephesus and in verse 28 these elders collectively are reminded of their task of overseeing God's church. In 1 Timothy 4:14 Paul uses the term 'eldership,' denoting the body of elders. From these data we conclude that the elders of a given church were not to exercise their office in isolation from each other; they were instead to work together, form a team, be a leadership-giving-body (see Acts 15:6). This leadership-giving-body is known in churches of continental origin as a 'consistory'. (In churches of English origin this body is commonly known as a 'session').

Classis and synod on the other hand are not specifically commanded by the Lord. Nevertheless, it is evident from God's Word that the presence of these two kinds of assemblies amongst His churches is His will. In 1 Corinthians 16:1 Paul speaks of the "*churches of Galatia*." These churches were separate from each other (each, for example, was governed by their own elders who were responsible for the local church; see above). Yet these "*churches of Galatia*" knew each other and did things together; in this case, for example, Paul instructed them to cooperate together in collecting for the poor. In verse 19 Paul passes on greetings from the "*churches of Asia*." In 2 Corinthians 8:1 Paul informs the Corinthian brethren of what he witnessed concerning evidence of God's grace amongst the "*churches of Macedonia*." The repeated use of the plural implies that the churches of Galatia, Asia and

Macedonia were seen as distinct entities (hence the plural), and at the same time associated together (hence the geographic reference). Since there is "*one, holy, catholic church,*" the churches of the Lord need to cooperate with each other, to stand beside and support each other. Just as individual church members exercise communion of saints within a congregation, individual churches can likewise exercise communion of saints by meeting together, for mutual benefit, with ever increasing numbers of neighbouring churches. These meetings are termed 'classes' (plural of classis) and 'synods'.

3. NATURE OF THE ASSEMBLIES

3.1 Consistory

That elders of a given church meet together from time to time to discuss together the care of the flock entrusted to them speaks for itself. The Church Order formulates it this way:

"In all the churches there shall be a consistory composed of the minister(s) of the Word and the elders. It shall meet regularly..." (Article 36).

It is at this level that the Lord has placed authority within His church (see Matthew 18:17). Any matter relevant to the good government of the Lord's church in a given place may be placed on the agenda of the Consistory.

3.2 Classis

Although each individual church is complete in Christ and therefore autonomous, the fathers envisaged that it would be of mutual benefit to churches in relative proximity to meet together from time to time. Accordingly, in the Church Order we have agreed that "*neighbouring churches shall come together in a classis ...*" (Article 41). The term 'classis' denotes this meeting of churches-in-relative-proximity. (A secondary use of the term 'classis' denotes the geographic area in which the churches-that-meet-in-classis are located.) The agendas of classes should be comprised of matters of local concern which the local churches could not finalise on their own (see below).

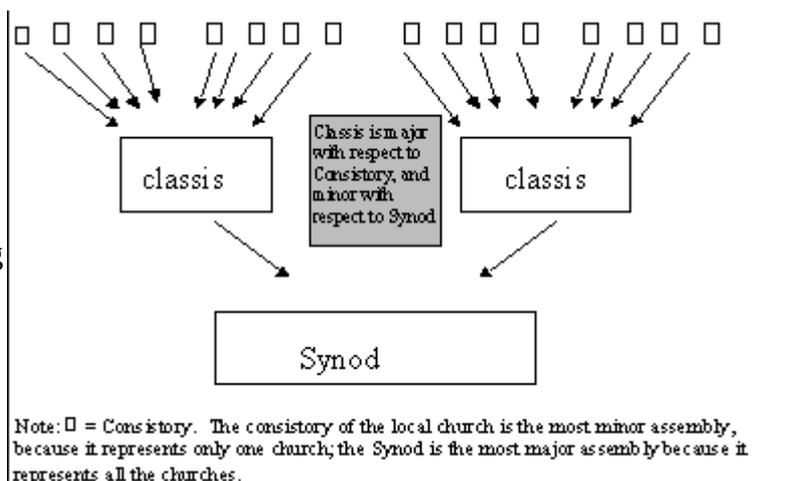
3.3 Synod

From time to time, classes send delegates to a meeting of all the churches in the bond. This meeting-of-all-the-churches is termed a 'synod'. Synods deal only with matters which could not be finalised in the classical assemblies, plus issues common to all the churches (cf Article 30; see below for more details).

The overriding purpose of both classes and synods is to stand beside and support (the Consistory of) the local church, for each church is a complete congregation of the Lord.

4. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ASSEMBLIES

The three ecclesiastical assemblies of consistory, classis and synod are also referred to as minor and major assemblies. A consistory, representing only one church, is the most minor assembly. Any assembly which is broader in its representation, representing more than one church, is called a *major* assembly, relative to an assembly narrower in its representation (see Diagram).



Major assemblies are not *higher* assemblies with more authority but *broader* assemblies with NO authority. It was only to the most minor assembly, the consistory, that the Lord Jesus Christ assigned authority of their own. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:28), and Paul charged the elders of Ephesus to "*take heed to ... all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has may you overseers*" (Acts 20:28). The elders' authority extended no further than the church in which they were appointed to office; the elders in Antioch had no authority over the church at Derbe. If no elder has any authority in any church other than his own, no meeting of elders (be it from a number of churches) has any authority over the churches represented at that meeting – whether it be classis or synod. Major assemblies, then, cannot be said to have authority. In the diagram I have endeavoured to convey this concept by placing the consistory at the top of the diagram. Under Christ this is where the (highest and only) authority lies.

Reformed church polity recognises, though, that major assemblies do have something to say to the local churches. Article 35 formulates it like this:

*"The classis has the same **jurisdiction** over the consistory as the synod has over the classis."*

Though the term 'jurisdiction' may not be the best possible term (but no one has suggested a better one), it does convey the notion that the Church Order wants to communicate. Literally, from its Latin roots the term means: to have 'the right of say.' A meeting of the churches in a classical resort has no authority over the individual churches. For example, a classis cannot tell a congregation to which minister it must extend a call. However, the churches have learned from Scripture that seeking advice and listening to each other is necessary and important. For the Lord teaches:

"Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety" (Proverbs 11:14).

"Without counsel, plans go awry, but in the multitude of counsellors they are established" (Proverbs 15:22).

From passages of Scripture as these, we conclude that it is foolish for a local congregation to be independent, set on going its own way and ignoring its neighbouring churches. In other words, as churches too, we need each other in decision making processes, and so we do well to listen to what the other has to say. For this reason, the churches have agreed to give to classis the right to say something (on particular matters) to the congregations in its resort.

Together the churches agree to the items placed on the agendas for classes. Since the churches recognise that a major assembly, 'a multitude of counsellors', has less chance of erring than a minor assembly, they agree too that they shall accept the decisions of the major assemblies. Though the major assemblies have no authority, they do have the 'right of say', and so the churches agree to accept what the major assemblies say – unless, of course, a decision of a major assembly is contrary to Scripture. Since decisions of major assemblies are binding, the onus is on every church to go through the Acts of the major assembly in order to learn what decisions have been laid on their path and weigh whether these decisions are indeed pleasing to the Lord.

5. DELEGATION TO MAJOR ASSEMBLIES

With regard to delegation to classes, Article 41 specifies that each church shall send two men: "*Neighbouring churches shall come together in a classis by delegating a minister and an elder, or if a church has no minister, two elders.*" Each classis in turn "*shall delegate two ministers and two elders to synod*" (Article 45). This means that some churches in a classis might not have a delegate at synod. One cannot call this an 'unfair representation' for delegates at a synod are not representatives of their consistories. The most able men, because of their wisdom, are delegated to attend synod in order to decide on matters for the benefit of the churches. At major assemblies delegates DO NOT speak on behalf of their respective consistories but they speak on the basis of God's Word. Decisions are

binding, then, not because one's own representative was there to help make the decision, but rather because the decisions agree with the Word of the Head of the Church.

Delegates to major assemblies bring with them a letter of credential, in accordance with Article 32 which stipulates, "*Delegates to a major assembly shall bring with them their credentials, signed by the minor assembly.*" The purpose of these credentials is to inform the major assembly officially who it is that the minor assembly has in fact delegated to that major assembly. That is why delegates to classis have their credentials signed by their consistory and delegates to synod have their credentials signed by their classis. Implicit in giving a credential is that the minor assembly recognises the jurisdiction of the major assembly and so promises to accept its decisions as settled and binding.

6. FREQUENCY OF ASSEMBLIES

6.1 Consistory

To tend the flock entrusted to the care of the elders, it is necessary that the elders meet together from time to time. No set frequency can be stipulated, since the needs of the congregations differ. The Church Order formulates it this way: the consistory "*shall meet regularly*" (Article 36). In practice, elders meet on average at least twice per month.

6.2 Classis

Given the reason why major assemblies are necessary, it follows that the churches ought to meet together relatively frequently. One cannot be of assistance to each other if one does not meet together. For that reason, the Church Order stipulates that "*classes shall be held at least once every three months ...*" (Article 41). Nothing beats face to face discussions with the sister churches in order to prevent straying apart and promote development and uniformity of thought.

6.3 Synod

The heart of church life revolves around the local churches. The assistance needed in the local churches from the bond comes via classes. This in turn means that a meeting of all the churches in the bond need not occur with near the frequency that classes meet. The time interval between Synods, then, is agreed in the Church Order to be "*once every three years*" (Article 45).

7. TASKS OF THE ASSEMBLIES

7.1 CONSISTORY

The task of the consistory has already been discussed in relation to Article 20, which reads,

Article 20 - Task of elders

"The elders shall together with the ministers of the Word govern the congregation with pastoral care and discipline. For the upbuilding of the congregation they shall make homevisits as often as is profitable but at least once a year. They shall watch that their fellow office-bearers are faithful in carrying out their duties and ensure that in the congregation everything is done decently and in good order."

This Article reflects the scriptural command given to the elders of Ephesus as we read it in Acts 20:28, "*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.*" In carrying out this task, the elders shall need to meet together to discuss the needs of the sheep of the flock in their care.

Since this is the God-given task of the elders, it will not do for a consistory to get involved in politics, social concerns in the community, economic issues in the land or any other such unecclesiastical matters. This same principle applies equally to the matters to be dealt with by the other assemblies. The Church Order catches the concept in Article 30 with these words: "*These assemblies shall only deal with ecclesiastical matters and in an ecclesiastical manner.*"

Those latter words, that assemblies are to deal with matters "*in an ecclesiastical manner*" reflects the fact that office bearers speak Christ's Word. Their authority rises not from the muscle of force, but only from being able to show from Scripture that "this is what the Lord says." Imposing fines or gaol sentences on erring members, then, is unacceptable conduct for office bearers. (Unfortunately, history is not without its examples of assemblies dealing in unecclesiastical ways.)

Article 36 makes allowance for the consistory, in its task of governing the local congregation, to meet also with the deacons:

Article 36 - Consistory

"In all the churches there shall be a consistory composed of the minister(s) of the Word and the elders. It shall meet regularly and be chaired by the minister. If a church is served by more than one minister they shall chair in turn. The consistory shall also meet regularly with the deacons to deal with those matters as described for that purpose by the Church Order, and further with all things which the consistory considers necessary for general management, including the material affairs of the church."

Here we read of two matters dealt with by consistory together with the deacons: 1, items of general management, including finances, budgeting, mission work, synod and other matters pertaining to the bond of churches; 2, those matters as described for that purpose by the Church Order; i.e. those matters the churches have agreed to deal with as consistories together with the deacons. These are as follows:

- The calling to office: Article 3

*"The calling to office shall take place by the consistory **with the deacons** The consistory **with the deacons** shall give the congregation the opportunity to draw the attention of the consistory to brothers deemed suitable for the respective offices. The consistory **with the deacons** shall present to the congregation at the most twice as many candidates as there are vacancies to be filled.... Those elected shall be appointed by the consistory **with the deacons**."*

- The release of a minister from a church: Article 7

*"A minister once lawfully called shall not leave the church to which he is bound to take up the ministry elsewhere without the consent of his consistory **with the deacons** and the approval of classis."*

- The dismissal of a minister: Article 14

*"The consistory **with the deacons** shall not dismiss a minister from his bond with the congregation"*

- Deacons may be added to the consistory: Article 37

Although the Church Order stipulates in Article 36 that a consistory is composed of the minister(s) and the elders, it does also make allowance for the deacons to be included with the consistory if numbers so require it:

*"Where the number of elders and deacons is small **the deacons may be added to the consistory by local arrangement**. This shall invariably be done where there are less than three elders and less than three deacons. In these circumstances matters pertaining to supervision and discipline shall be handled with the advice of the deacons and matters pertaining to the office of deacons with the advice of the elders."*

On the other hand, in Article 30 of the Belgic Confession we confess that the ministers and elders, together with the deacons, form the consistory:

*"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**."*

Such was the case when deBres wrote the Belgic Confession in 1561 and it was still so in 1568 when the Convent of Wezel drew up a Church Order.

Due to historical reasons the deacons became increasingly involved in financial matters and there developed a separation between the offices of minister and elder on the one hand and the office of deacon on the other. This was reflected in the Church Order of Dort, 1618-19. On the basis of Scripture one cannot say that the one is more correct than the other. Our Church Order today stipulates neither of the two extremes above, but has the deacons working together with the consistory in certain matters, and elders and deacons do indeed co-operate as required.

7.2 CLASSIS

The churches involve classis in matters they themselves were unable to finalise. If local churches have a problem, such as a difficult discipline case, they may seek advice from their neighbouring churches via classis. As stated earlier, it is a scriptural principle that there is wisdom in consulting together. Classis, then, does not set its own agenda, but the churches who meet together list the items each may wish on the agenda. Consequently, Article 30 states,

"A major assembly shall deal only with matters which could not be finished in the minor assembly or which belong to its churches in common. A new matter may be put on its agenda only when the minor assembly has dealt with it."

The Church Order has also assigned certain tasks to classes. These include matters pertaining to entry to and release from the ministry:

- Eligibility for the ministry: Article 5.B

*"Only those shall be declared eligible for call within the churches who (1) have passed a preparatory examination by the **classis** in which they live"*

- Exceptional gifts: Article 8

When a person with exceptional gifts has not undertaken the regular theological studies but

*"presents himself for the ministry, **classis** shall (with synod's prior approval) examine him, and upon a favourable outcome allow him, as candidate, to speak an edifying word in the churches of the classis for a set period of time. Thereafter the **classis** shall further deal with him as it shall deem edifying, observing the ecclesiastical regulations adopted for this purpose."*

- The dismissal of a minister: Article 14

*"The consistory with the deacons shall not dismiss a minister from his bond with the congregation without the approval of **classis** and the concurring advice of the deputies of synod."*

- Church Visitation: Article 44

*"Each year **classis** shall authorise at least two of the more experienced and able ministers to visit the churches in that year. If necessary the **classis** may authorise a capable elder to carry out this task together with a minister. It shall be the task of these visitors to inquire whether all things are regulated and done in full harmony with the Word of God, whether the office-bearers fulfil the duties of their office faithfully as they have promised, and whether the Church Order is being observed and maintained in every respect, in order that they may in good time fraternally admonish those who are found negligent in any thing, and that by their good counsel and advice all things may be directed towards the edification and preservation of Christ's church. They shall submit written reports of their visits to **classis**."*

Church visitation serves to assure the churches that when they meet together in their assemblies they are meeting as churches which remain faithful in their service of the Lord. They need to investigate each other whether church life is conducted according to the principles they as churches have agreed upon and formulated in the Church Order. Church visitors are to inquire whether the office-bearers are faithful in carrying out their respective offices, ensuring faithful preaching, pure administration of the sacraments and that discipline is exercised. If the church visited is found to be a faithful church of the Lord the visitors report this to classis, testifying thereby to the other churches in classis that this is a worthy sister church with which they can work together. When church visitors find a church to be unfaithful in any matter, they must speak to the consistory, not on their own authority, but on the basis of Scripture, in brotherly admonition. On the basis of the consistory's response to the admonition the visitors report to classis.

- The appointment of counsellors for vacant churches: Article 43

*"Each vacant church shall request **classis** to appoint as counsellor the minister it desires as such, to the end that he may assist the consistory in maintaining good order and especially may lend his aid in the matter of the calling of a minister; he shall also sign the letter of call."*

The counsellor's role is to stay informed with matters pertaining to the vacant church, ensuring that good order is maintained in all matters, for example, that office-bearers are appointed according to the correct procedures, and being available to give advice as required.

- Dealing with appeals from church members: Article 31

"If anyone complains that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly he shall have the right of appeal to the major assembly; and whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order."

This article recognises that the brothers of consistory are sinful men who can make mistakes. If a person rightfully complains to his consistory that it has wronged him, the consistory should acknowledge this. However, in the absence of such an acknowledgment from consistory, a person may appeal to classis for it to decide by a majority vote. This decision of classis must be considered as settled and binding UNLESS it is proven to be unscriptural.

Important here is the motive of the appellant. Every church member must adopt for himself the attitude that it is the Lord who, in His care for the congregation, has given specific brothers as office-bearers to

the congregation. Therefore, when a consistory judges a matter, the members must start with the premise that the brothers aim to perform their office correctly. If it appears that consistory errs over against a member, it must be with a spirit of reluctance that he appeals to classis. Likewise, if classis errs, it is with a spirit of reluctance that an appeal is sent to synod. Appeals should not be regarded as a matter of course for one to pursue if one does not get his way.

7.3 SYNOD

The Church Order stipulates the following about synods specifically:

Article 45 - Synod

The synod shall be held once every three years. Each classis shall delegate two ministers and two elders to synod. At the close of synod the time and place for the next synod shall be determined and a church shall be appointed to convene it. A synod shall be convened before the appointed time if according to the judgment of at least two classes this appears necessary. Its time and place shall be decided by the church appointed as convening church for the next regular synod, subject to the approval of its classis.

The task of synod has already been stated in Article 30. As a major assembly, it

"shall only deal with ecclesiastical matters and in an ecclesiastical manner ... (dealing) only with matters which could not be finished in the minor assembly or which belong to its churches in common. A new matter may be put on its agenda only when the minor assembly has dealt with it."

Unfinished matters from the minor assembly would include appeals, and matters which the churches have in common would include matters as Bible translations, classes formation or relationships with churches abroad.

That relationships with other churches is not a local matter but instead a matter for the bond of churches together is specifically acknowledged in the Church Order:

Article 46 - Relationship with other churches

The relationship with other churches shall be regulated by synod. With churches of Reformed confession sister relations shall be maintained as much as possible. On non-essential points of ecclesiastical practice other churches shall not be rejected.

Non-essential points of ecclesiastical practice are, for example, the number of times a baby is sprinkled with water at baptism, whether to stand or sit for the Lord's Supper, whether people should kneel for prayer. A matter as who a Consistory may permit to the Lord's table is not a "non-essential point of ecclesiastical practice" since it receives particular attention in Article 57 (see below).

As with classis, a synod has no authority. Its agenda is put together by the churches (through classis) and the churches agree to accept what Synod decides, unless its decisions are contrary to Scripture.

Synods are short lived. Once the established agenda is completed, a Synod no longer exists. Yet instances arise where the mind of the bond of churches is required or where decisions made by Synod need to be executed. Accordingly, Synod appoints deputies.

Article 48 - Deputies of major assemblies

Each synod shall appoint deputies who are to assist the classes in all matters provided

for in the Church Order. A classis may request these deputies to assist in cases of special difficulties. Each synod shall also appoint deputies to carry out its own decisions. Different deputies shall be appointed as much as possible for separate matters. All deputies shall keep proper record of their work and submit a written report."

With regard to deputies assisting in "all matters provided for in the Church Order," these matters refer to the ordination and installation of ministers (Article 6.A.1.b), the dismissal of ministers (Article 14), and the deposition of ministers (Article 76).

With regard to deputies carrying out synod's own decisions, the reference is to persons being made responsible for relations with sister churches, relations with other Reformed or Presbyterian churches, Bible translation, training for the ministry, synod procedures and rules, archives and library of synod, etc. All deputies must report to the next Synod on the work they have done.

8 OTHER MATTERS PERTAINING TO ASSEMBLIES

8.1 Censure and Prayer

Article 29 - Proceedings

The proceedings of all assemblies shall begin and end with prayer.

One might question the necessity of including such an article in the Church Order. However, its inclusion is important for two reasons. One, it serves to impress that our help is in the Name of the Lord. At every assembly the brothers are busy with the Lord's work. Before the brothers begin their work they need to ask the Lord for wisdom to make decisions that are pleasing to Him and of benefit to His churches, and on completion of their work they need to ask for the Lord's blessing on the decisions made.

Secondly, Article 29 serves to undergird the stipulation of Articles 34 and 47. The brothers that meet in the assemblies remain sinful brothers, and in recognition of this fact, the Church Order stipulates that the chairman of an assembly

"shall deny the floor to those who argue about minor things or who let themselves be carried away and cannot control their emotions, and discipline those who refuse to listen" (Article 34)

and that

"At the close of the major assemblies censure shall be exercised over those who in the meeting have done something worthy of reproof" (Article 47).

When there has been unbrotherly conduct and disharmony in a meeting, prayer is not possible unless their has been reconciliation.

8.2 Tasks of the chairman and clerk / Record Keeping

Article 34 - Chairman and clerk

In all assemblies there shall be a chairman and a clerk. The chairman's task is to present and explain clearly the matters to be dealt with and ensure that every one observes due order in speaking His task shall cease when the assembly ends. The clerk shall keep an accurate record of all things worthy of being recorded.

Local rules will outline the tasks of the chairman and the clerk in far more detail. Keeping accurate records of previous decisions and their grounds is important for a couple of reasons. One is simply the matter of consistency and continuity. Further, Article 33 of the Church Order stipulates that "*Matters once decided upon may not be proposed again unless they are substantiated by new grounds.*" Hence the inclusion of Article 49 that "*The assemblies shall ensure that proper care is taken of the archives.*"

8.3 Constitution of a consistory / Places without a consistory

Before a congregation can be instituted, concurring advice of classis is required.

ARTICLE 38 - Constitution of a consistory:

If a consistory is to be constituted for the first time or anew, the advice of the classis church shall be sought.

The reason for this is first of all that the new congregation will become a member of the bond of churches. Then the bond of churches (via classis) will want to be satisfied that the motives for institution are valid (or is it an attempt to break away from a disliked minister or consistory – which is an unchristian attitude), that there are adequate office-bearers to tend to the needs of the sheep in this new flock, and that the new congregation can survive (though assistance can be offered here if necessary). Though no minimum or maximum numbers are specified for the congregation as a whole, there must however be at least three office-bearers.

However, until such times that a consistory can be constituted, Article 39 applies:

ARTICLE 39 - Places without a consistory

Places where as yet no consistory can be constituted shall be assigned by synod to the care of a neighbouring consistory.

This stipulation is included in the Church Order to ensure that all sheep of the Lord receive the pastoral care they require.

8.4 Mission Work

The gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ has been entrusted to the church (1 Timothy 3:15; 4:6). The church is charged by the Lord to bring this gospel to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:19f). Each church, then, has the privileged obligation to do all within its ability to cause the gospel to go out to those who do not know the Lord. However, not every church has within its own membership the means to support a missionary. It is fitting, then, that the churches of a given area cooperate together in mission work. In Article 50 the churches have agreed to do so.

Article 50 - Mission

The churches shall endeavour to fulfil their missionary task. In doing so they shall observe the provisions of this Church Order. When churches cooperate in mission work they shall as much as possible observe the division into classes.

It could be argued that the matter of Mission would be better placed in Section 1 of the Church Order. The reason for its placement in Section 2 is because it speaks of the churches engaging in mission work co-operatively in classical areas.

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE OF REFORMED CHURCH POLITY

THE CHURCH ORDER OF DORT

Articles 51-68

III. WORSHIP, SACRAMENTS AND CEREMONIES

Section One of the Church Order dealt with the Lord's church gathering work. As we noted, in this church gathering work the Lord is pleased to make use of office-bearers. The Church Order has described the responsibilities of the offices and how office-bearers should fulfil their respective responsibilities. Although the local church is an ecclesiastical assembly in its own right, the church gathering work of the Lord is not restricted to the local scene only. Hence each local church, for mutual benefit, interacts with sister churches within relative proximity. This interaction takes place via broader ecclesiastical assemblies such as classes and synods. In Section Two of the Church Order we examined the various agreements the churches have made with regard to the authority, constitution, and jurisdiction of each of the ecclesiastical assemblies.

The church the Lord gathers also operates in a certain manner. Section Three of the Church Order makes some stipulations in relation to how things ought to be done in relation to worship, sacraments and ceremonies.

1 WORSHIP

Scripture teaches that faith is worked by the Holy Spirit through the preaching. *"And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? ... So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God"* (Romans 10:14-17). This is echoed in the Lord's Day 25.65 of the Heidelberg Catechism:

"Since then faith alone makes us share in Christ and all His benefits, where does this faith come from?"

From the Holy Spirit, who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel, and strengthens it by the use of the sacraments."

The preaching is critical for faith in God. This given of Scripture has prompted the churches to make the following agreement in the Church Order for observance throughout the bond of churches:

ARTICLE 62 - Church services

The consistory shall call the congregation together for church services twice on the Lord's Day.

The church is the workshop of the Holy Spirit; here it is that the Spirit through the preaching is pleased to work faith in the hearts of the hearers. Note how Article 62 goes further than simply stating that the consistory shall call the congregation together for church services. It also stipulates the day on which services should be held and the frequency of the worship services.

1.1 CHURCH SERVICES ON THE LORD'S DAY

The congregation is to come together for church services on the Lord's Day. For Old Testament Israel the Lord's Day was the Sabbath, the last day of the week. Living in New Testament times we observe the Lord's Day on Sunday, the first day of the week. (It is clear from Article 63 that by Lord's Day the Sunday is meant). The transition of the Lord's Day from Sabbath to Sunday is based on developments that took place in the New Testament church after Jesus' death, as revealed to us in Scripture:

John 20:1, 19

Here we read that the disciples assembled together on the day of Jesus' resurrection, which took place on the first day of the week.

*"Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.... Then, **the same day** at evening, **being the first day of the week**, when the doors were shut where **the disciples were assembled**"*

John 20:26

"And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!"

John makes a point of telling us that "after eight days" the disciples were again together. (By Jewish reckoning, "after eight days" is again the Sunday – counting from Sunday to Sunday.) Though by Old Testament regulation the disciples ought to be at work, they are today assembled together, including Thomas. On *this* day, and not on the Sabbath, Jesus chose to meet with His disciples again.

Acts 2:1-4

Two significant details are recorded here concerning the first day of the week. On this first day of the week the disciples were again assembled together. This particular first day of the week was also the day on which the Holy Spirit was poured out. In Acts 2:1 one reads, "*When **the day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.***" The day of Pentecost is the New Testament name for the Old Testament 'Feast of Weeks.' Pentecost means fifty. This day of Pentecost was fifty days after Jesus' resurrection from the dead (again, by Jewish reckoning, counting from both the day of resurrection and the day of Pentecost). While the disciples were gathered together on this first day of the week, the Lord was pleased to pour out His Holy Spirit.

Acts 20:7

*"Now on the **first day of the week**, when **the disciples came together** to break bread"*

The pattern expressed in the weeks after Jesus' resurrection and confirmed on the day of Pentecost became the norm for the New Testament church. Nowhere do any of the apostles condemn or correct this pattern. On the contrary, the apostles approve it, and even command it, as the next quote shows.

1 Corinthians 16:1,2

Paul made the following request of the saints at Corinth,

*"Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: **On the first day of the week** let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come."*

The implication of this statement is that the Corinthian saints met together for worship not on the Sabbath but on the first day of the week. That is why Paul nominated this day for the saints to make their offerings for the collection for the saints.

Revelation 1:10

John, exiled to the island of Patmos, records the following,

*"I was in the Spirit **on the Lord's Day**"*

The 'Lord's Day' is a reference to the day of the week on which the Lord Jesus rose from the dead, i.e.

the first day. If the Lord God wished His saints to give no special attention to this day, He would neither have called it "the Lord's Day" nor told us that John's vision came to him on this day of the week.

The above Scripture texts served as adequate evidence for the fathers to specify that the consistory should call the congregation together for church services on the first day of the week.

1.2 TWO CHURCH SERVICES PER SUNDAY

That people assembled together for worship on the first day of the week can quite easily be established on the basis of Scripture. What is not so clear from Scripture is the number of times people assembled on a Sunday. From the Old Testament we learn that the people had to offer sacrifices twice daily, once in the morning and once in the evening. In Numbers 28:1-4 we read, "*Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Command the children of Israel, and say to them, 'My offering, My food for My offerings made by fire as a sweet aroma to Me, you shall be careful to offer to Me **at their appointed time.**' And you shall say to them, 'This is the offering made by fire which you shall offer to the LORD: two male lambs in their first year without blemish, day by day, as a regular burnt offering. The one lamb you shall offer in the **morning**, the other lamb you shall offer in the **evening**.'*" Although this instruction of the Lord related to the daily sacrifices rather than the weekly day of worship, inherent in it is a valuable principle which the fathers took to heart. By means of daily sacrifices offered both in the morning and in the evening, every entire day for each Israelite was bracketed by visible gospel preaching and prayer. The sacrifices were a visible proclamation of the gospel of substitution. Twice a day it was impressed upon the people that although it was they who deserved to die on account of their sins, God accepted the lambs they sacrificed as an atonement for their sins. God did so with a view to the death of His Son, The Lamb, would die in the future. This is the closest the fathers could come in terms of scriptural argumentation for stipulating that consistories should call congregations together for worship twice per Sunday. The fathers reasoned that the whole Sunday, from morning to evening, should be devoted to the Lord.

The consistory, then, shall call the congregation together for church services twice on the Lord's Day. The elders shall generate opportunity for the flock entrusted to them to hear the preaching of the Word through which the Holy Spirit works faith.

In the preaching it is important that "*the whole counsel of God*" (Acts 20:27) be proclaimed. The whole Word of God has been given by the Spirit for the edification of God's people, and He is pleased to use the whole Word to work and strengthen faith. The preaching of the Word, then, should not neglect any point of doctrine contained in Scripture. The preacher, though, is a sinful man. It is possible for a minister to preach his way through particular Bible books without touching on certain points of doctrine; yes, it is possible that he is loathe to preach on a particular doctrinal matter and so avoids certain Scripture passages. For that reason the fathers added to the Church Order Article 63 concerning the need for Catechism preaching once per Sunday:

Article 63 - Catechism preaching

The consistory shall ensure that as a rule once every Sunday the doctrine of God's Word as summarised in the Heidelberg Catechism is proclaimed, preferably in the afternoon service.

Article 63 is evidence of what the fathers have done in an effort to ensure that Satan does not sabotage the work of the Holy Spirit through the preaching. Similar efforts were made earlier in the Church Order by including Articles 24-26, about the Subscription Form and False Doctrine. The evil one goes out of his way to spread heresy. Paul warns the elders of Ephesus, "*For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock*" (Acts 20:29). In 2 Corinthians 11:13 Paul likewise warns against "*false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ.*" If at all possible, Satan will plant heresies amongst God's people, making the lie more appealing than the truth. In 2 Timothy 3:5-8 Paul urges Timothy to turn away from those "*having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away! ... Now as Jannes and*

*Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith." The problem is that people like false teaching. "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but **according to their own desires**, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Timothy 4:3,4). Timothy should not be surprised, for it is in the human heart to desire what is most pleasing to the self. Therefore the fathers saw the need for stipulating that in the worship services the doctrine be taught on a regular basis. The congregation needs to be safeguarded against any opportunity Satan may generate in his efforts to entice believers away from the truth. Hence the agreement that the doctrine of the Word of God as summarised in the Heidelberg Catechism be proclaimed Sunday by Sunday.*

As a point of interest, Articles 24 and 25 (concerning the Subscription Form) used to be included in Section Three of the Church Order. This fact points up how seriously the fathers took Paul's warnings about Satan's attacks.

1.3 SINGING IN THE WORSHIP SERVICES

Satan is cunning and will use whatever means available to divert people from the truth. Singing touches people's emotions and Satan will also play on these. Hence there is good reason for stipulating in the Church Order what ought to be sung in a church service.

ARTICLE 64 - Psalms and hymns

In the church services only the psalms and hymns approved by synod shall be sung.

Although the Church Order cannot specify what ought to be sung in the homes or the schools, there is no reason why the arguments for prescribing the 150 psalms and a select number of hymns to be sung in church would not be equally valid for the homes and the schools. If we want the threefold triangle of church-home-school to be a closely-knit triangle, then we want to use the material of the church in the homes and schools also. Let home and school not undermine the Church Order. With church-life being central to our lives, there should be a ripple effect from the church into our homes and schools. Parents and teachers should therefore be encouraged to teach the children the songs of the church. The words of the 150 psalms as we find them in our Bible (and put to rhyme in our *Book of Praise*) come from God Himself and the hymns approved by synod are (largely) other portions of God's Word put to rhyme. With what better words could we praise God in song than with the Word He Himself has given to us? No songs of man, not even Charles Wesley's hymns, can equal God's songs. Let us recognise the wealth we have received in our *Book of Praise* and sing these songs.

2 SACRAMENTS

Preaching is the tool used by the Holy Spirit for working faith in people's hearts. By audible preaching the Spirit instils faith and by visible preaching, i.e. the administration of the sacraments, the Spirit strengthens faith (see Lord's Day 25 above). Satan prefers to choke faith so that it perishes, and history proves how hard he has tried to twist, hollow-out or destroy the sacraments. For the sake of protecting God's church against Satan's attacks on the sacraments, and to ensure that faith is indeed strengthened by their use as God intended it, the fathers saw need to include the following article on the administration of the sacraments:

ARTICLE 51 - Administration of sacraments

The sacraments shall be administered only in a church service by a minister of the Word with the use of the adopted Forms, and under the supervision of the elders.

Article 51 stipulates four conditions under which the sacraments must be administered:

(a) Only in a church service:

The preaching of the gospel has been entrusted to the church, occurring in church under the supervision of the elders who are the official authority in the church. What is true of the audible preaching applies equally to the visible preaching; Word and sacraments cannot be separated. The sacraments are not the private domain of the minister, the church member or a club, and so they cannot be administered in people's homes or in any private place. The sacraments belong to the church, the communion of saints, and so they must be administered where the saints are assembled and the elders are present.

(b) By a minister of the Word:

This stipulation emphasises the direct association between the sacraments and the preaching. Audible preaching and visible preaching have essentially the same message. The man entrusted with the task of the audible preaching of the Gospel is also the man entitled to administer the sacraments – the visible preaching. The two cannot be separated.

(c) With the use of the adopted Forms:

The fathers recognised that the heart of man is subtle and that Satan will do what he can to twist the truth of the gospel. What Scripture teaches concerning baptism and holy supper is accurately captured in the respective Forms. So, in order to protect the congregation from twisted doctrine, the churches have agreed that only these Forms are to be used in the administration of the sacraments. If a scriptural understanding of the gospel contained in the sacraments is not set before those who receive the sacraments, their faith will not be strengthened as ought. And the preaching as a whole will deteriorate also.

(d) Under the supervision of the elders:

The elders have been charged to watch over the flock, ensuring too that the flock receives the truth of God's Word. The visible preaching of the gospel in the sacraments, then, must come to the people not by the hand of one individual alone, but under the supervision of the elders.

2.1 BAPTISM

2.1.1 INFANT BAPTISM

ARTICLE 52 - Baptism of infants

The consistory shall ensure that the covenant of God is sealed by baptism to the children of believers as soon as feasible.

Baptism is the sign and seal of God's covenant. The content of this covenant is explained in detail in the adopted Forms referred to in Article 51. That God includes children in His covenant is clear from the following Scripture texts:

Genesis 17:7-14

God said to Abram, "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you."

God made His covenant not with the man Abram alone, but also with his seed. That God specifically included also the children in His covenant of grace is pointed up in the fact that every male child born to Abram's house was to receive in his flesh, already at the early age of eight days, the sign of God's covenant. Said God, "*This is my covenant which you shall keep, between Me **and your descendants** after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised.... He who is **eight days old** among you shall be circumcised*" If a child was not circumcised he was excluded from the covenant and its

blessings. *"And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant."*

Acts 2:39

Said Peter to all who had assembled together on the day of Pentecost, *"For the promise is to you **and to your children**, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call."*

God does not change. As His Old Testament promises extended specifically also to the children, any change of this pattern would have to be announced in so many words in the New Testament. There is no such text. Instead, Peter on the day of Pentecost speaks specifically of *"the promise"* (that's the one from the Old Testament, Genesis 17) being for the adults gathered before him *"and to your children."* All heirs of God's promises, including the children, are then to receive the sign and seal of these promises.

1 Corinthians 7:14

*"For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, **but now they are holy.**"*

The children of believers, even if children have only one believing parent, are holy in God's eyes; they belong to Him. God claims the child for Himself right at the beginning of its life, and therefore the child needs to receive the sign of the covenant right at the beginning.

The essential content of circumcision and baptism is inherently identical. Of this fact the church has made profession in Article 34 of the Belgic Confession:

*"We believe and confess that Jesus Christ ... has abolished circumcision, which involved blood, and has instituted in its place the sacrament of baptism.... (The little children of believers) ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as infants were circumcised in Israel on the basis of the same promises which are now made to our children. Indeed, Christ shed His blood to wash the children of believers just as much as He shed it for adults. Therefore they ought to receive the sign and sacrament of what Christ has done for them, as the Lord commanded in the law that a lamb was to be offered shortly after children were born. This was a sacrament of the passion and death of Jesus Christ. Because baptism has the same meaning for our children as circumcision had for the people of Israel, Paul calls baptism the **circumcision of Christ.**"*

Article 52 stipulates that the children of believers should be baptised *"as soon as feasible."* This is in obedience to what the Lord commanded in Genesis 17:12. God insisted on circumcision at the very early age of eight days. Because the content of circumcision and baptism is identical, this text has value in the new dispensation also. Therefore children must be baptised as soon as feasible.

2.1.2 TEACHING THE COVENANT CHILDREN

Take note of how Article 52 (above) is formulated. It does not say that the parents shall ensure that the covenant of God is sealed by baptism but rather, *"the **consistory** shall ensure"* The Church Order concerns itself with the proper functioning of the church and therefore this article is about consistory's responsibility in relation to the administration of the sacrament of baptism. Here the Church Order alludes to the consistory's teaching role. The children God entrusts to believers are His children, who also need the care of office bearers. Yet God has entrusted these children not to the office bearers as such, but to parents. The office bearers, therefore, need to see to it that parents understand the identity of the children God entrusts to them. The result of parents understanding the riches of God's covenant will surely be that they present their child for holy baptism, and do so as soon as feasible. Satan for his

part would love to see the church ignorant of the identity of the children God gives, and so works hard (and not without success) to get people to believe for example, that baptism is not for infants but for adults only. The consistory has the task to teach what God has revealed in His Word about baptism and God will bless this instruction by making the parents see their responsibility.

The Scripture texts quoted above concerning the inclusion of the children in God's covenant receive further application in Article 53.

ARTICLE 53 - Baptismal promise and education

The consistory shall make sure that the parents honour their vows to instruct their children, to the utmost of their power, in the doctrine of the Scriptures as summarised in the confessions, and to have them instructed in the same by the instruction provided by the consistory.

In accordance with the same vow, the consistory shall see to it that the parents, to the best of their ability, and with the cooperation of the communion of saints, give their children education (as stipulated by the civil government) which is based on Scripture and Confession.

We commonly speak in terms of parents receiving children, and so emphasising the responsibility of the children to honour their God-given parents. It is also true, though, that God gives children to parents. That is to say: God is pleased to use particular parents to raise particular children of His. So the parents of a given child receive from the Lord the specific task to teach this child who he is, namely, a covenant child. This duty of the parents is drawn out in various passages of Scripture.

In Genesis 18:19 we read of the task God gave to Abraham as the parent of covenant children. "*For I have known (Abraham), in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.*" Here is a charge to Abraham: because God's covenant is made with him and his seed, he needs to make it his business to teach his offspring the way of the Lord.

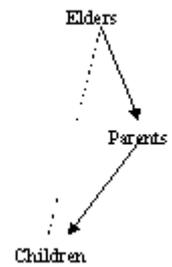
The Israelites had experienced the plagues God sent to Egypt, the Exodus from Egypt, had walked the path God had made for them by separating the waters of the Red Sea, and had gathered together before the Lord when He made His covenant with them at Horeb (Mt Sinai). Forty years later, many Israelites would still have had clear memories of these events when God gave the following instruction, "*Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And **teach** them to your children and your grandchildren, especially concerning the day you stood before the LORD your God in Horeb, when the LORD said to me, 'Gather the people to Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.'* Then you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, And the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire So He declared to you His covenant ..." (Deuteronomy 4:9-13). The parents, and also the grandparents, are to instruct the younger generation about the works of God, and especially about His covenant made at Horeb. God repeats this instruction in Deuteronomy 6:6,7, "*And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall **teach them diligently** to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.*"

The instruction of the children is the responsibility of the parents. Yet we need to understand that the elders have a task here also. Said Paul 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). A flock consists not only of mature sheep, but also of lambs. The elders must take heed to the entire flock. The elders need to see to it that the lambs of God's flock receive from their God-given parents the care they actually need. When parents present their children for baptism, they answer in the affirmative this question: "*... do you promise as father and mother to instruct your child in this doctrine, as soon as he (she) is able to understand, and to*

have him (her) instructed therein to the utmost of your power?" It is the task of the elders to ensure that parents faithfully carry out the promise of this vow.

The matter may be schematised as in the diagram. Elders have a task in relation to both the parents and the children. However, the care for the children is given first of all to the parents. The elders' responsibility to the children is via the parents. The consistory must ensure that parents are obedient to the task to which they are called in the passages of Scripture as cited above. If the parents are remiss in doing their job in relation to the children, then the elders' task in relation to the parents is to remind them to be faithful to their vows, and their task in relation to the children is to see to it that they receive the instruction they need. To assist the parents in their task, the consistory must also conduct catechism classes and see to it that the parents have their children attend these classes and do the assigned work. Further, the elders need to include the children in their annual homevisits. All this the elders owe to the children because the children are part of the flock God entrusted to their care.

Task of Elders



The second part of Article 53 deals with the consistory's responsibility towards the children's schooling. Here it is not stipulated that the consistory is responsible for organising and setting up Reformed schools. Rather, the consistory should impress upon the parents, and the whole communion of saints, the importance of Reformed schools. It is because the children are holy in God's eyes, set apart in a godless society, that they need Reformed education at school.

However, setting up a Reformed school never frees the parents from their responsibility of teaching their children the doctrine of Scripture. Though Satan wishes for parents to think that teaching the children in the ways of the Lord is the teacher's job, the Lord clearly delegates this task to the parents. If the parents aren't faithful in their responsibilities towards their children at home, then the work of the schools will fail. Satan does not spare the little ones in the flock. So it will not do for the elders to stand idly by if parents neglect to instruct their children, or send their children to a school that is godless. Similarly, the office bearers do well to ensure that the instruction given at the schools indeed accords with the identity of the children as God's little ones.

2.1.3 PUBLIC PROFESSION OF FAITH

By the grace of the Lord, who blesses faithful work of parents and elders, the lambs of His flock grow into mature sheep. It is a fruit of the labours of parents and elders that the youth of the church grow spiritually to the point when they themselves respond to their baptism. In Article 54 this personal response of accepting in faith the promises and obligations of God's covenant is given the name of 'Public Profession of Faith.'

ARTICLE 54 - Public profession of faith

Those who desire to publicly profess their faith shall be examined by the consistory on their motivation and knowledge of the doctrine of God's Word. The public profession shall take place in a church service, with the use of the adopted Form.

Article 54 reflects again that the elders are responsible for the entire flock. It is they who must examine the youth on their motivation for professing their faith, and their knowledge of the doctrine of Scripture. This examination is more than an academic exercise. The knowledge gleaned over the years through parental instruction, church instruction and school needs to be complimented by a lifestyle pleasing to the Lord and a love for the God who rescued from Satan's clutches. The consistory needs to be convinced that the motivation for professing the faith is genuine.

If the elders can discern a sincere, loving faith in response to the nurture and instruction by the parents and office-bearers, then the public profession takes place in a church service with the use of the adopted Form. By baptism one is grafted into the Christian church, the body of true believers, and so it is fitting that one's response to baptism should also take place when the members of the body meet

together. The content of one's public profession of faith must be the same as that of all the other members and for that reason Article 54 stipulates the use of the adopted Form.

2.1.4 ADULT BAPTISM

Not all those whom God has chosen to life are born and raised in the church – and hence baptised as infants. God has His elect also outside the covenant circle, and for that reason "*sends heralds of this most joyful message to whom He will and when He wills*" (Canons of Dort, I,3). As a result of such mission work (be it 'official' or 'unofficial'), people come to faith as adults. In accordance with Mark 16:16, these new believers must also be baptised, "*He who believes and is baptised will be saved ...*" The apostles followed this pattern too when their preaching met with faith in the hearers (Acts 8:38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15,33; 18:8). In recognition of this instruction of the Lord, the churches have agreed the following:

ARTICLE 55 - Baptism of adults

Adults who have not been baptised shall be grafted into the Christian church by holy baptism upon their public profession of faith.

Here it is recognised that adults are not to be baptised unless they believe. So public profession of the faith must precede baptism of adults. The 'Form for Adult Baptism' is essentially an amalgamation of the two forms adopted for infant baptism and public profession of faith.

For those adults who come to faith later in life but have already been baptised, the church recognises their baptism as long as this baptism was administered by a person who was an officially recognised office bearer in that church, the person was baptised in the name of the Triune God (and not, say, in the name of Love, Hope and Charity), and the sacrament was administered with the use of water.

2.2 THE LORD'S SUPPER

Agreements have been made in the Church Order also in relation to the second sacrament the Lord has given to His church. The manner in which the sacrament of the Lord's supper ought to be administered has already been dealt with in Article 51. The Lord's supper, like baptism, "*shall be administered only in a church service by a minister of the Word with the use of the adopted Forms, and under the supervision of the elders.*" Article 56 does not go into any details either concerning the content of the sacrament of the Lord's supper for this is contained in the "*adopted Form*" stipulated in Article 51.

1. Frequency

ARTICLE 56 - Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper shall be celebrated at least once every three months.

The brevity of Article 56 has no bearing on its significance. In Article 56 the fathers acknowledged two important realities. Firstly, by the respective eating and drinking of Christ's body and blood, the believers are spiritually nourished and encouraged. Secondly, since Satan is at work to see the faith of all believers shrivel and die, he does all he can to prevent such nourishment and encouragement obtained through this sacrament and so he tries to prevent its celebration. For that reason the fathers stipulated that the Lord's supper shall be celebrated at least once every three months.

One could discuss at length the merits of celebrating the Lord's supper a given number of times per year. Scripture gives no command here. Over against the trend to multiply celebrations, it is worthwhile to note what God stipulated concerning the celebration of the Old Testament sacrament of Passover (which had the same essential content as the New Testament sacrament of Lord's supper). Passover had to be celebrated at a fixed frequency of once per year; no more, no less. "*On the fourteenth day of the first month is the Passover of the LORD*" (Numbers 28:16). Familiarity breeds contempt! Like food that is eaten too often and tends to lose its taste and appeal, the significance the

Lord's supper can be lost on us if we celebrate this sacrament too often. The churches have decided only on a minimum number of celebrations per year namely, at least once every three months. For the rest, the matter is left to the discretion of the local consistory.

2.2.2 Attendance

Article 57 addresses the question of who should sit at the table of the Lord.

ARTICLE 57 - Admission to the Lord's Supper

The consistory shall admit to the Lord's Supper only those who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life. Members of sister churches shall be admitted on the basis of a good attestation concerning their doctrine and conduct.

The Lord's table is not open to just anybody. The onus lies first on the individual to ensure that he is indeed able before God to sit at the Lord's table. Speaking of the Lord's supper in 1 Corinthians 11:28-30, the apostle Paul stresses personal responsibility for lawful participation in the sacrament. "***But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep.***"

The fact that the individual is responsible for his or her participation in the sacrament does not exclude the fact that the elders also have a responsibility here. In the Old Testament the priests were responsible for the 'fencing of the tabernacle.' The people of God came to the tabernacle regularly with their sacrifices. However, not all could actually present sacrifices. Leviticus 13 for example speak of persons with leprosy. We are to understand that the leprosy spoken of in this chapter had nothing to do with the illness known today as Hansen's Disease. Instead, the point of leprosy was that death—that result of the fall into sin—had manifestly found a place in the person. The sores and spots, then, symbolised the spiritual affliction with which all people were afflicted. So, "*when a man has on the skin of his body a swelling, a scab, or a bright spot, and it becomes on the skin of his body like a leprous sore, then he shall be brought to Aaron the priest or to one of his sons the priests. The priest shall examine the sore...*" (Leviticus 13:2). As a result of his finding, the priest ultimately might have to instruct the Israelite with the spot that he was "*unclean, and he shall dwell alone; his dwelling shall be **outside the camp***" (Leviticus 13:46). That meant also that unclean person could not enter the tabernacle of the Lord. Before a leper could again be admitted he first had to be examined by the priest and be pronounced clean (Leviticus 14:1).

Article 57 stipulates that the consistory shall 'fence' the Lord's table. When a person continues in sin despite having received admonitions from others in private (and so continues to present himself at the table of the Lord), the consistory must take on the task of discipline and withhold the sinner from the communion of the Lord's table. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul admonishes the church at Corinth for having failed to discipline the brother who lived in a sinful relationship with his stepmother. Paul's instruction is therefore to "*deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh...*" (1 Corinthians 5:5). This brother had to be barred from the Lord's table. It is imperative that the consistory carry out its responsibility in this regard for unlawful participation has serious consequences for the sinner and for the congregation. In Corinth there was weakness, sickness and death in the congregation (1 Corinthians 11:30). God has made the elders accountable for the souls of the congregation members. "*Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, **for they watch out for your souls as those who must give account.***" (Hebrews 13:17). The office-bearers have a responsibility to guard the Lord's table lest He pour out His wrath upon the congregation.

Although it is not explicitly stated in Article 57 that children are excluded from the Lord's table, this is implied in the condition that one must have professed the Reformed faith and be leading a godly life. Children are not yet of an age that enables them to fully understand and responsibly answer to the promises and obligations received in God's covenant. Children first need to mature to an age of discernment.

Having professed the Reformed faith at some point in one's life does not mean that one is automatically entitled to be admitted to the Lord's table. As Article 57 stipulates, one also needs to be leading a godly life. The two criteria, profession of faith and a godly life, are equally valid for all persons. There may be no double standards in this regard. Therefore the churches have agreed that *"Members of sister churches shall be admitted on the basis of a good attestation concerning their **doctrine and conduct.**"* An attestation (see below) is a testimony from one's consistory concerning a person's 'spiritual temperature.' A church accepts the attestations it receives for members from sister churches because it accepts the work of the office-bearers in those churches. Anyone who is not a member of the local church or of one of its sister churches must first be examined by consistory *"on their motivation and knowledge of the doctrine of God's Word"* (Article 54).

3 RECORDS AND ATTESTATIONS

3.1 Church Records

Article 58 picks up on the matter of church records and it is placed here because it ties in directly with the previous articles concerning the sacraments. This article reads,

Article 58 - Church records

The consistory shall maintain Church records in which the names of the members and the dates of their birth, baptism, public profession of faith, marriage, and departure or death are properly recorded.

These data are important because they assist the elders in their task. In order to be able to shepherd the flock the elders need to know who their sheep are, as well as pertinent information about the sheep. So the churches have agreed to keep proper records of these things.

3.2 ATTESTATIONS

It is not correct to regard an attestation as an existing personal document valid for all time which one requests to see or have access to. An attestation is a testimony concerning one's spiritual health at the time of writing, which one requests when wishing to participate in the Lord's supper in a sister church (Article 57), or when one moves to and wishes to join a sister church in another locality (Article 59). The Scriptures background for the practice of issuing attestations include the following:

Romans 16:1,2

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."* This communication from Paul amounts to a testimony to the church at Rome about sister Phoebe.

Acts 18:27

Similarly, we read 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."*

1 Corinthians 16:3

Paul instructed the Corinthians to lay aside gifts for the needy in Jerusalem. He adds, *"And when I come, whomever you approve by your letters I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem."*

On the strength of such like passages, the churches have agreed to give written testimonies concerning members who seek to visit or join another church.

ARTICLE 59 - Attestations for communicant members

Communicant members who move to another congregation shall be given, following appropriate announcements to the congregation, an attestation regarding their doctrine and conduct, signed on behalf of the consistory by two authorised office-bearers. This attestation shall also record their children who have not yet made public profession of faith. The consistory of the congregation concerned shall be notified in due time.

In Article 28 of the Belgic Confession, we echo the teaching of our Lord like this: "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 state or quality may be. But all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it" The point is that I may not be content to be on my own. I belong to Christ, and therefore am to join myself to a body of Christ as it visibly assembles in different places on this earth. If I then move elsewhere, I am to join the assembly of true believers in that new locality. To make that transition easier (both for myself who moves as well as for the consistory of the church I seek to join), the churches have agreed to give testimonies to the departing person as well as to accept the testimony given by the 'old' consistory to the 'new' member. For in the bond of churches office-bearers in one church accept the work performed by office-bearers in a sister church, and so accept the testimony submitted and receive the person as a member. Since parents remain responsible for their children's church membership until the time they make public profession of faith, the names of the children who have not as yet made public profession of faith are recorded on the parents' attestation. An attestation includes all the details the elders of the new congregation will need to know in order to carry out their task of shepherding the new members.

Article 59 also stipulates that members who move shall be given an attestation "*following appropriate announcements to the congregation.*" The congregation should be given the opportunity to raise any concerns or objections, as well as to bid them farewell. The consistory which wrote the attestation is also to inform the consistory of the new congregation concerned that an attestation has been given to a member. This is done out of pastoral care for the member, so that the chances of losing the member are minimised should he be remiss in handing in his attestation. Technically speaking however the consistory has no responsibility for the new member until such time that the attestation is handed in. By not handing in one's attestation a member effectively withdraws from the church.

ARTICLE 60 - Attestations for non-communicant members

An attestation for a non-communicant member shall be sent directly to the consistory of the church concerned with the request to take the member under its supervision and discipline.

For communicant members the attestation is not given to the member but it gets sent directly to the church to which he has moved. This is because the member hasn't yet responded to his baptism and so the responsibility for the member lies with the consistory.

ARTICLE 61 - Support after departure

When members depart to another congregation where they will be cared for in institutions, aged persons homes or nursing homes, they shall in respect of deacon support remain under the care of the church they are leaving. If this is not possible support will be arranged by consultation between the consistories and deacons concerned.

This article arrests any temptation that may arise to suggest to a member in need of financial support that he/she move away to another congregation in order to be rid of the financial obligation.

4 OTHER ITEMS

The remaining articles of this section of the Church Order cover a series of left over items upon which the church have agreed to act in a particular manner.

4.1 ECCLESIASTICAL FEAST DAYS

Although there is no scriptural command to do so, the fathers saw merit in commemorating the highlights of salvation history by means of holding church services.

ARTICLE 65 - Ecclesiastical feast days

On Christmas Day, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Ascension Day and at Pentecost the consistory shall call the congregation together for church services. The sacred events which the congregation commemorates in particular on these days shall therein be proclaimed.

The gospel contained in the events of Christ's birth, death, resurrection, ascension, and outpouring of His Holy Spirit is central to the faith of every believer, on which his temporal and eternal well-being depends. Hence the churches have maintained the practice developed over the centuries of church history to commemorate these highlights of our Saviour's work by calling the congregations together for worship services on the day the feast is remembered. In this service, the preaching will focus on the significance of the respective feast day.

4.2 DAYS OF PRAYER

The fathers reckoned with the fact that a church or bond of churches may find itself directly or indirectly affected by natural, political, social or economic afflictions. Difficult circumstances may warrant the proclamation of a day to be especially devoted to prayer in order to beseech God to take away the affliction. Synod is to appoint one church responsible for appointing days of prayer.

ARTICLE 66 - Days of prayer

In times of war, general calamities and other great afflictions the presence of which is felt throughout the churches a day of prayer may be proclaimed by the church appointed for that purpose by synod.

It must be remembered that all prayer is to be God-centred and not man-centred. The focus must be on what God is revealing about Himself in the affliction. Our thoughts and prayers must then not only concentrate on relief but there must also be confession of sin. If a plague comes upon the land no-one, including the church, can wash his hands clean of guilt. In His Word God makes a very clear link between obedience and blessing, between disobedience and curse. In Leviticus 26 God tells Moses with what blessings He will reward Israel's obedience and with what curses He will punish their disobedience. Moses passes on God's Word to Israel saying, "*Now it shall come to pass, **if you diligently obey** the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth. And all these **blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the LORD your God But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey** the voice of the LORD your God, ... that all these **curses will come upon you and overtake you: ...**" (Deuteronomy 28). This Old Testament principle comes back again in the New Testament. In Revelation 7,8 and 9 one reads of the plagues God will send as punishment upon covenant breaking. Therefore, if the Lord afflicts the country of which we are a part, then let us seek God in prayer, not only asking him to remove the affliction He has sent, but also to confess sin and to repent, and to ask the Lord to work repentance in the land as a whole.*

4.3 MARRIAGE

The churches saw need to give special attention to marriage. God, after all, has given marriage a distinct place in His church gathering work. Through marriage the Lord is pleased to give children and so, through the generations, God preserves His church. However, God's blessing of receiving children is accompanied by a calling to instruct these children in the ways of the Lord. The consistory's task of ensuring that the "*parents honour their vows to instruct their children, to the utmost of their power, in the doctrine of the Scriptures ...*" (Article 53) does not begin after parents have made their vows at their child's baptism, but starts as early as a couple's courtship days. The elders are to see to it that no-

one be "*unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?*" (2 Corinthians 6:14,15). How shall a father bring up to the Lord's glory the covenant children entrusted to him, if he first has chosen an unbeliever to become mother of his (potential) children?! Besides, the Scriptures speak of marriage as "*a great mystery*" reflecting the relation between Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:32).

ARTICLE 67 - Marriage

The consistory shall ensure that the members of the congregation marry only in the Lord, and that the ministers – as authorised by the consistory– solemnise only such marriages as are in accordance with the Word of God. The solemnisation of a marriage shall take place in a private ceremony, with the use of the adopted Form.

In order to 'marry in the Lord,' both marriage partners must serve God (first commandment), and both must serve and obey God in the same way, i.e. according to His Word (second commandment). Because the children God may be pleased to give a married couple need to be taught God's ways, it is crucial for each person considering marriage to marry a person who serves God and serves Him obediently. Such a person one finds only in the church. After all, which church one attends is also a matter of obeying God's command to serve Him in the manner He has prescribed. This is not to say, of course, that church membership is the decisive question. Within the church are also hypocrites. But one cannot claim to "marry in the Lord" if one seeks to marry a believer from another church.

The minister solemnises the marriage upon authorisation of the consistory. Who one marries is not a private matter alone, but involves the consistory also. For the sake of God's name and the future of the church, the consistory will only authorise the marriage of persons who belong to the church of Jesus Christ.

The churches have agreed that marriage would not be solemnised in a church service but in a private ceremony. It should be noted, though, that on this point Scripture is silent.

The Church Order makes one last stipulation namely, that marriage shall be solemnised "*with the use of the adopted Form.*" This form summarises what God teaches about the institution of marriage, its reflection of the relationship between Christ and His church, the purpose of marriage and the duties of marriage. By use of this form the consistory ensures that the members do not enter marriage on the basis any false understandings or expectations which Satan would love to implant in a couple's hearts and minds, for Satan knows only too well that his access to the God's covenant children is minimised through 'marriages in the Lord.'

4.4 FUNERALS

ARTICLE 68 - Funerals

Church services shall not be conducted for funerals.

In the course of church history, the Roman Catholic practice and belief that the dead are dependent on the prayers and intercessions of the church in order to be accepted into heaven has slain its thousands. Funerals are emotionally laden times, and so the churches have agreed before hand that at funerals the consistory shall not call the congregation together for a church service. The family, however, may certainly request to be comforted from Scripture. At the family's discretion, this can be done in church or elsewhere.

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE OF REFORMED CHURCH POLITY

THE CHURCH ORDER OF DORT

Articles 69-79

IV. CHURCH DISCIPLINE

When the fathers in their wisdom sat down to write a Church Order they considered it beneficial to include a section on church discipline. It was considered beneficial that within a bond of churches discipline should be administered in a uniform manner. Rather than repeat what Scripture and Confession already teach about church discipline, Section 4 of the Church Order spells out how scriptural principles should be put into practice in the exercising of church discipline.

1 BACKGROUND

1.1 THE CHURCH IS HOLY

The church is not a society or a club belonging to the members. The church is the result of the Lord's work through Jesus Christ, and so is His possession. Since the Lord is holy, His people are holy also. To His people of the Old Testament the Lord said in Exodus 22:31, "**And you shall be holy men to Me ...**", and in Leviticus 11:44, "*For I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy....*" Peter echoes this in the New Testament with these words of 1 Peter 1:15, "*but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct*" and in 1 Peter 2:9, "*But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people*" The church, the people of the Lord, is to be identified with holiness.

This holiness of the Lord's church is drawn out the more when Scripture speaks of God dwelling in the midst of His people. The Lord told Israel in Exodus 29:45 that, "**I will dwell among the children of Israel and will be their God.**" The same thought is echoed in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 3:16. Paul says to the saints in Corinth, "*Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that **the Spirit of God dwells in you?***" The Lord identity as God dictates that His church be holy.

1.2 SIN MAY HAVE NO PLACE IN THE CHURCH

Satan, whom Peter compared to a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8), makes it his business to attack and devour God's church. Satan does so under various guises. As Paul warns the Corinthians, "*... Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light*" (2 Corinthians 11:14). Though we belong to the Lord we remain vulnerable to sin and evil, prey to Satan's attacks. Therefore the church, though it is and must be holy, can also be infiltrated with sin. In light of the holiness which holy God demands of His church, such infiltration of sin is not acceptable. God shall see to it that sin tolerated in His church shall receive His punishments. In the Old Testament God taught this principle with the words of Deuteronomy 28:15, "*But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments and His statutes which I command you today, **that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you.***" Verses 16-68 list God's curses upon disobedience.

This principle has not changed in the New Testament. This is clear, for example, from what Paul wrote to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 11:27ff. There the apostle stresses the need for self-examination prior to the celebration of the Lord's supper. "*For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself.*" To eat and drink judgment to oneself means to call God's judgment upon oneself. It was because the Corinthians failed to judge themselves, failed to examine themselves for the presence of sin in their lives, that God judged them and hence they suffered weakness, sickness and many 'slept' ('sleep' is here a euphemism for death). There was unholiness amongst God's flock in Corinth and God expressed His displeasure with this unholiness in a clear manner. This drove home to the church that they had to make a point of cutting sin out of the church.

1.3 THE WAGES OF SIN IS DEATH

How is one to cut sin out of the church of the Lord? The pattern of the Old Testament involved physically killing the sinner. In Deuteronomy one reads of several examples of sins that had to be punished, the punishment serving the purpose of removing sin, unholiness. Hence the repeated refrain, "so you shall put away the evil from among you." For example, Deuteronomy 13 speaks of the possibility of a false prophet arising within Israel saying, "Let us go after other gods ... and let us serve them" (vs 2). God's response to such prophecy is, "... that prophet or that dreamer of dreams **shall be put to death** **So you shall put away the evil from your midst**" (vs 5). A similar warning is given in the verses 6-11. If anyone sought to entice God's people away from faithful service to Him, that sinner had to be cut out of Israel in order to remove the sin from Israel. Said God to Israel, "you shall not consent to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him or conceal him; **but you shall surely kill him**; ... And you shall stone him with stones until he dies, because he sought to entice you away from the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. So all Israel shall hear and fear, **and not again do such wickedness as this among you.**" The penalty of transgression against God's commandments was death. The sinner had to be removed so that sin might be removed. Holy God could tolerate no unholiness amongst His holy people. So one reads again in Deuteronomy 17:2-7 that "any man or woman who has been wicked in the sight of the LORD ... shall be put to death.... **So you shall put away the evil from among you.**" As for the man who would not accept the verdict of the priest or judge, he too had to be put to death. "**So you shall put away the evil from Israel**" (Deuteronomy 17:8-12). Again, in Deuteronomy 19:19 one reads that a false witness is to receive the punishment the accused man would have received, and "**so you shall put away the evil from among you.**" Sin could not be ignored or tolerated amongst God's people for it polluted them and called for God's inevitable judgment.

This same principle is carried through in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 5:1 one reads of a man in the church living illicitly with his stepmother. The church in Corinth had failed to deal with this brother's sin and so there was evil in their midst. Paul therefore urges the saints at Corinth in verses 4 and 5 to 'deliver this man to Satan.' This terminology, 'delivering to Satan,' Paul explains in verse 13 by a quote from the Old Testament. He writes, "**Therefore put away from yourselves the evil person.**" He was, therefore, to be cut off from the flock, excommunicated. For in the church of Jesus Christ there is no room for evil. Again, in his letter to Timothy Paul records what he did to two brothers who suffered shipwreck concerning the faith. Paul says that he has "**delivered to Satan**" these two brothers "that they may learn not to blaspheme" (1 Timothy 1:19f). The concept of excommunicating a sinner from the church arises also in 2 Thessalonians 3:14, where Paul addresses the church of the Thessalonians with this instruction, "And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and **do not keep company with him**...." John instructs his readers about the person who, though he presents himself as a Christian, brings a false teaching. "If anyone come to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him" (2 John 10).

The church discipline of the Old Testament, then, reaches through into the New Testament. The reader notices, though, a difference in the way this discipline is administered. The Old Testament spoke of death; the New Testament of putting away, of distance. One is inclined to think that New Testament discipline is far more gentle, much less radical than Old Testament discipline. That perception, however, is incorrect. God has moved forward in His plan of salvation. So the saints addressed in the letter to the Hebrews are told (12:18-29) that they, unlike their brethren of the Old Testament gathered around Mt Sinai, "have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire...." Instead, these New Testament saints "have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel (vs 22-24). The implication of these words is to be found in the verses 25-29, "See then that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth (the reference is to the Israelites gathered around Mt Sinai, who saw so much of God's holiness), much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven.... **Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire.**" Much has happened since Mt Sinai for God has sent His Son to earth to die for sin. In the events of Calvary, we have seen

more of God's holiness than the Israelites around Mt Sinai. That makes our responsibility the greater. If we give ourselves to sin, the penalty is worse for us than it ever was in the Old Testament dispensation.

One might ask how the penalty for us, excommunication, could possibly be worse than the death penalty of the Old Testament. Wasn't the death penalty the ultimate punishment for sin? The point is that the death penalty is not the equivalent of going to hell. Rather, for the child of God death is the gateway to Heaven. Although condemned to die as punishment for sin, such a penalty did not imply an automatic sentence to hell. Where there was faith, the guilty person could still receive forgiveness of sins and inherit the crown of righteousness. Excommunication on the other hand has eternal repercussions; it is not simply something that is valid for this life only. Jesus, when addressing His disciples about how to exercise discipline against wayward members said to them, *"Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven"* (Matthew 18:18). Excommunication serves as a message to a wayward member that he is spiritually dead, is on his way to hell. This makes excommunication far worse than the death penalty of the Old Testament. At the same time, there is mercy here, for the excommunicated is not directly sent to hell. He receives opportunity yet to repent (see below). This opportunity, though, takes nothing away from the radical seriousness of excommunication.

The church of Christ, then, holy that it is, may never minimise or neglect church discipline. We live in the New Dispensation and so have seen more of God's justice displayed in Christ Jesus. That means consequently that we have a greater responsibility to tolerate no love for sin in the church of Christ. To remain a true church, the church must remain faithful in exercising church discipline.

2 THE PURPOSE OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

The Church Order begins its discussion on church discipline with a brief description of discipline's aim.

ARTICLE 69 - Aim of discipline

Church discipline shall be exercised in accordance with the Word of God and to His honour. Its aim is to reconcile the sinner with God and the neighbour, and to remove the offence from the church of Christ.

Church discipline to serve its intended aims only if it is conducted according to God's Word. Calvin saw church discipline as serving the following three aims, all three of which can be found back in Article 69:

1 *"... that they who lead a filthy and infamous life may not be called Christians, to the dishonour of God, as if his holy church [cf. Eph. 5:25-26] were a conspiracy of wicked and abandoned men."*

Calvin's argument here is that because the church is God's and God is holy, the moment sin is honoured in the congregation the name of the Lord is dishonoured. Article 69 echoes this in the words, *"Church discipline shall be exercised ... to (God's) honour."*

2 *"... that the good be not corrupted by the constant company of the wicked."*

Here Calvin summarises the lesson of 1 Corinthians 5:6,7, where the apostle speaks of leaven, *"... Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened..."* Yeast in a batch of dough permeates the whole batch; it is the same with the presence of sin in the congregation. For that reason the sinner needs to be removed. As Article 69 states, the aim of church discipline is *"to remove the offence from the church of Christ."*

3 "... *that those overcome by shame for their baseness begin to repent.*"

This is in line with what Paul commanded the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 5:5 namely, to "*deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, **that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.***" Church discipline aims to move the sinner to repentance; it seeks the sinner's salvation. To use the words of Article 69, "*Its aim is to reconcile the sinner with God and the neighbour.*"

3 WHO MUST EXERCISE CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

Church discipline tends to be considered as the exclusive responsibility of the consistory. That can be explained by the fact that it is the consistory which plays the most visible role in seeing to it that sin is cut out from the congregation. It is the consistory which has the authority to withhold someone from the Lord's table and it is the consistory which makes the public announcements which culminate in excommunication. However, Scripture teaches that the exercising of church discipline is not primarily the consistory's responsibility. Rather, it is first and foremost the responsibility of the church membership at large. The heart of church discipline is love for the neighbour. As it is written in Leviticus 19:17,18, "*You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbour, and not bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, **but you shall love your neighbour as your self: I am the LORD.***"

By giving himself to sin, a brother places a barrier between himself and God, and so prevents God's blessings from coming upon him. In that circumstance, the Lord's instruction was that my love for the erring brother means I do what I can to help him remove the barrier he placed between himself and God. It makes no difference whether or not I was the object of his sinful act; I am to seek no vengeance (as in, letting God's wrath rest on my brother because of what he did to me), nor bear any grudge or harbour hatred against the one who hurt me. Instead, the Lord would have me rebuke my erring brother and seek his repentance – lest I sin on account of him.

It is no different in the New Testament. All the saints around the world are equipped to admonish each other. What Paul urged the Galatians (and us) to do is not too difficult, namely, "*Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual **restore such a one** in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted*" (Galatians 6:1). The fruits of such mutual discipline are this: "*Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that **he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins***" (James 5:19,20). Paul saw need to address the church at Corinth about the sinful relationship between a brother in the church and his stepmother, and gave the instruction to drive out the sinner. But note that Paul's instruction is not given to the elders of the church in Corinth. From 1 Corinthians 1:2 we learn that Paul addressed his letter "*To the **church** of God which is at Corinth, **to those who are sanctified** in Christ Jesus, called to be saints*" Paul considers the saints at Corinth responsible to drive out the wicked person from among them.

This principle returns in Jesus' instruction in Matthew 18. There Jesus spoke the following well-known words: "*... if your brother sins against you, **go and tell him his fault** between you and him alone*" (Matthew 18:15). One must bear in mind that the brother is guilty of sin. By sinning against you he has also sinned against God and ruined the good relationship that exists between him and God. Jesus' instruction is that you, even though you may have been offended by him, perhaps hurt by him, you take the initiative and approach him, telling him his fault. Whether or not this is an easy thing for you to do is irrelevant, for the Lord has given us His Spirit so that we can do His will. Our motivation will not be to tell the wayward brother about the hurt he did to me. Rather, the point of the admonition must be to tell the brother that what he did affects his relationship with God and that he needs to repent of that sin lest God's wrath be poured out upon him. Says Jesus, "*If he hears you, you have gained your **brother***" (Matthew 18:15). What makes him a brother is the shared bond with God. The goal of mutual discipline is the sinner's restored relationship with God of which a restored relationship between brothers is a blessed fruit.

The question arises whether the obligation to admonish a brother applies only if one has been personally offended by that brother? It would seem so, since Jesus' discourse about mutual discipline in Matthew 18:15-18 commences with, "... *if your brother sins **against you***" It must be borne in mind that although in Matthew 18 Jesus was speaking to the disciples in the specific context of sin against the self, the principle that applied in that context also has a broader application. Leviticus 19:18 does not say to rebuke your neighbour if he has sinned against you but simply, "*You shall surely rebuke your neighbour.*" In his epistle (chapter 5:19,20), James also speaks in general terms about the person to be admonished. "... *If **anyone** among you wanders from the truth and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns **a sinner** from the error of his way*" Paul writes in Galatians 6:1, "*Brethren, if **a man** is overtaken in **any trespass***" Whether one is personally affected by the brother's sin or not, it is love both for the brother and for God Who gave His Son to save this brother that motivates one to remove the sin that stands between him and God.

Should the admonition of one person prove to be ineffective, Jesus stipulates that the wayward brother must be visited together with two or three witnesses. "*But if he will not hear, take with you **one or two more**, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established'*" (Matthew 18:16). Here the Lord echoes the principle of the Old Testament: "*One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; **by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established***" (Deuteronomy 19:15). In the presence of these witnesses one is to tell the brother what his sin is and why it is sin, and urge him in God's Name to repent. Should he then still persist in his sins the other witnesses, motivated by the same love you have for the erring brother, should also urge him to repent. Should he still refuse to repent at this stage, then "*tell it to the church*" (Matthew 18:17), and if the admonitions of the church are ineffective, "*let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector*" (Matthew 18:17).

These principles of Scripture receive are worked out concretely in two articles of the Church Order.

Article 70 - Mutual responsibility

If anyone departs from the pure doctrine or is delinquent in conduct and this is a secret matter which does not give rise to public offence, the rule which Christ clearly prescribes in Matthew 18 shall be observed.

That is to say: the individual congregation members are to act according to bear in mind the responsibility God has laid at the feet of each individual church member toward wayward members, as taught by Christ in Matthew 18. Never may the membership consider discipline to be strictly a matter for the consistory. This truth of Scripture is driven home the more with the following article:

Article 71 - Consistory Involvement

The consistory shall not deal with any report of sin unless it has first ascertained that both private admonitions and admonitions in the presence of one or two witnesses have remained fruitless, or the sin committed is of a public character.

Church discipline is considered in our age to be an outdated concept. So the danger is real that churches fail to exercise church discipline. However, when church discipline is not exercised in a church, we may not lay the blame first of all at the consistory's feet. Granted, the consistory has an important responsibility in exercising church discipline (see below). But it needs to be fixed in our minds that church discipline is first and foremost the responsibility of the church membership.

4 AGAINST WHOM MUST CHURCH DISCIPLINE BE ADMINISTERED?

It holds true for every individual in this life, Christian or no Christian, that sin ruins one's relationship with God. However, can a congregation member bring the misconduct of his unbelieving neighbour to the attention of consistory? No! As Article 20 stipulates, the consistory has been given the task of looking after the congregation. "*The elders shall together with the ministers of the Word **govern the congregation** with pastoral care and discipline.*" Office-bearers have authority only in the church in which they have been ordained, and hence have no authority over a member of another church (not

even within a bond of churches), let alone over the unbelieving neighbour across the road. The objects of church discipline are the members of the church.

This was so in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 17:7 God commanded, "*So you shall put away the evil **from among you**.*" 'Among you' was not a reference to what was happening amongst the Moabites in their land; it was rather a reference to what was happening within Israel. The same idea can be found in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 5:12,13. There Paul writes, "*For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are **inside**? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore 'put away from yourselves the evil person.'*" Church discipline can be administered only within the church. Therefore, if someone decides to withdraw from the church whilst undergoing church discipline, consistory's authority over him ceases at the moment of his withdrawal. He is then no longer under the jurisdiction of consistory and he can no longer be under church discipline. Those who withdraw try to short-circuit church discipline on the grounds that it is just an issue between people. In reality, though, church discipline is a matter between the sinner and God. Even though a sinner under church discipline may withdraw from the church, the fact remains that he still has an unresolved problem with God. Withdrawal from church, therefore, is never a legitimate escape from church discipline. One day the sinner has to meet his Maker. Then he cannot afford to have sins on his hands from which he has not repented.

5 WHAT SINS ARE WORTHY OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

Everyone sins. We all can identify with Paul's lament, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but **the evil I will not to do, that I practice....** O wretched man that I am!" (Romans 7:18-24). No matter how great our respect for Paul might be, he was the first to admit how much of a sinner he was and continued to be. Said Paul in 1 Timothy 1:15, "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom **I am** chief." Notice how the regenerated apostle used the present tense. Therefore let no-one be surprised to find the worst of sins, even in the church of the Lord. One may think here also of the sins of an Abram (Genesis 16:3), a Moses (Exodus 2:12; Numbers 20:11), an Eli (1 Samuel 3:13), a David (2 Samuel 11), an Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26:16), a Hezekiah (2 Kings 20:13), a Peter (Matthew 26:69-74; Galatians 2:12), and so on.

That does not mean that we are all the objects of church discipline. For church discipline addresses not each person who sins, but each person who hardens in sin, who refuses to repent from sin. In every man there is sin, but from Psalm 32:1,2 we learn that God declares blessed the person who repents of sin. "**Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.**" Who is the object of church discipline? The sinner who refuses to repent of sin. Which sin is censorable? Any sin can lead to church discipline if there is no repentance.

6 THE 'HOW' OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE

6.1 Determination of Repentance

It is intriguing that the Church Order precedes the two articles concerning church discipline procedures with an article on repentance. In so doing the Church Order gives expression to the aim and hope of church discipline. The aim is not to get rid of a person from the congregation, to get him into hell. The aim is to save the sinner. See Article 69. As soon as possible, a disciplinary procedure is to cease. This hope and aim receives early formulation in the Church Order like this:

Article 72 - Repentance

When someone repents of a public sin or of a sin which had to be reported to the consistory, the latter shall not accept his confession of sin unless the member concerned has shown real amendment. The consistory shall determine whether the congregation shall be informed afterwards.

Note that true amendment is sought: not tears, but deeds.

6.2 Discipline of Communicant Members

In the church all are baptised. That is to say: God has made His covenant of grace with all members of the congregation, old and young alike. Some of the members have responded to God's covenant of grace by professing the faith and so taken upon themselves the responsibilities that God has built into His covenant; these persons are termed "communicant members". Others of the members (the younger) have not (yet) responded to God's covenant of grace, and so have not yet taken upon themselves the responsibilities that come with that covenant; these are termed "non-communicant members". With respect to discipline, the two groups cannot be treated fully alike. Hence two articles appear in the Church Order detailing the steps of church discipline to communicant and non-communicant members respectively.

ARTICLE 73 - Discipline in respect of communicant members

A communicant member who obstinately rejects the admonition by the consistory or who has committed a public or some other serious sin shall be suspended from the Lord's Supper. If he continues to harden himself in sin, the consistory shall publicly announce this to the congregation so that the congregation may be engaged in prayer and admonition and the excommunication may not take place without its cooperation.

It is the responsibility of each, before he attends the supper of the Lord, to "examine himself" (1 Corinthians 11:28). The elders, however, also have a responsibility (see Article 57). The table of the Lord should not be profaned by a person who refuses to acknowledge sin and repent of it. For the sake of the Lord's holiness and the sanctity of His table, then, the elders shall close the table to the sinner. By so doing, the message is impressed on the sinner that he may think that he will join in the supper of the Lord of the Last Day (Revelation 19:9,10), but, if he continues in his sin, in fact he will not join in that supper. His being withheld from the table on this earth, then, is intended to spell out to him the seriousness of his situation.

If the brother still refuses to repent, the consistory and congregation can appeal to the promises he made at his profession of faith. He said at this public profession that he believed the doctrine of the Word of God and promised to continue in this doctrine always, he embraced God's covenant promises as true for himself, he declared that he loved the Lord and desired to serve him, and promised also "to submit willingly to the admonition and discipline of the Church, if it should happen ... that you become delinquent either in doctrine or conduct." Because the sinner made these declarations "before God and His holy Church" at some point in the past, appeal can be put on the sinner, on the basis of his own statements, to repent of his sins and return to his promises. For that reason no less than three public announcements are made.

6.3 Congregational Involvement

How must the consistory deal with the sinner who refuses to repent? Discipline, we noted above, is first and foremost a congregational responsibility. When, therefore, there is a hardening in sin, the consistory involves the congregation by way of public announcements.

6.3.1 Announcements

The first announcement omits the name, but the second announcement mentions the person's name, thereby encouraging the congregation members to speak to the person concerned. The churches have agreed to the following procedure:

Article 74 - Announcements during the procedure

In the first public announcement the name of the sinner shall not be mentioned. In the second public announcement, which shall be made only after the advice of classis has

been obtained, the name and address of the sinner shall be mentioned. In the third public announcement a date shall be set at which the excommunication of the sinner shall take place in accordance with the adopted Form. The time interval between the various announcements shall be determined by the consistory.

By means of the various public announcements a consistory enlists the involvement of the congregation. Not only does church discipline begin with the congregation; it also ends with the congregation. The first public announcement urges the congregation to pray for the wayward member. If this does not lead to repentance, a second announcement provides the name of the member so that in addition to praying for the member, the congregation may also take up contact with the member, be it by way of correspondence or a visit. Again, where there is a continuing hardening in sin a third announcement informs the congregation of the date the member will be excommunicated, together with the urge once more to try to impress on the erring brother the need to repent. Excommunication is done in a church service in the presence of the congregation, for it is the congregation which excommunicates under the leadership of the consistory.

6.3.2 Time Frame

All of this takes time. Why is the consistory not to excommunicate immediately? The Church Order seems to allow a considerable time-frame between the consistory being informed and the step of excommunication. The Form for the Excommunication of Communicant Members as printed in the *Book of Praise* speaks of "*many*" or "*several earnest admonitions*" which the unrepentant sinner has received; repeated admonitions require time. It is quite apparent that church discipline according to the Church Order is not something that is done quickly. Why this time element, one may ask? After all, one could point to Matthew 18:17 and argue that Jesus did not seem to allow for much time to lapse between 'telling it to the church' and excommunication. Said Jesus, "*And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.*" Paul does not seem to have much patience either: "Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition" (Titus 3:10).

On the one hand one could argue against a long delay before excommunication. Isn't the church holy? For the sake of the holiness of Christ's church, if a member refuses to confess and repent of sin, isn't it a matter of urgency to cut him out of the congregation? For that reason Article 73 stipulates that such a member "*shall be suspended from the Lord's Supper.*" It is the task of the elders to guard the purity and holiness of the table of the Lord. It is clear from Article 73 that the fathers worked with the material of 1 Corinthians 11. Because the table of the Lord had not been guarded in Corinth, i.e. church discipline was not exercised, many in Corinth were sick or had died.

On the other hand, one needs to recognise that a certain measure of patience is required when dealing with unrepentant sinners. The road to repentance requires time and so one needs to be wary of excommunicating too hastily. Take David, for example. How long did it take for him to admit to his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah? Even after he found out that Bathsheba was pregnant (certainly a period of weeks), he added to his sin by having Uriah killed. It wasn't until after the widow Bathsheba had been taken into his house that, through Nathan's prompting, David confessed his sin. In Psalm 32 David himself admitted that God's heavy hand had to press on him for some time before he acknowledged his sin. David said,

*"When I kept silent, my bones grew old
Through my groaning all the day long.
For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was turned into the drought of summer"* (vss 3,4).

This certainly cannot be read to assume a quick repentance. In the brokenness of this life, repentance amongst God's elect does not necessarily happen over night.

The steps of withholding someone from the communion of the table of the Lord, the first, second and

third announcements before excommunication, and the involvement of classes, all take time. The three announcements are not to be made in consecutive weeks, but rather, in recognition of the patience required in order for a sinner to come to repentance, Article 74 stipulates, "*The time interval between the various announcements shall be determined by the consistory.*" That the advice of classis is sought by a church prior to proceeding with a second announcement acts as a safeguard to ensure that a church, rather than trying to get rid of a stubborn member, is truly seeking to gain the member.

6.3.3 Excommunication

In due time, excommunication becomes necessary. Excommunication, however, is still not the end of church discipline. The aim of church discipline included the sinner's repentance (Article 69). In Matthew 18:17 Jesus instructed his disciples, "... *But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.*" What did Jesus mean by having to treat the excommunicated member as a heathen and a tax collector? Was it Jesus' point that the unrepentant were to be avoided like the plague? The answer is No. Recall how Jesus Himself treated heathens and tax collectors. He did not leave them alone or avoid them. On the contrary, He sought them out. Take Zacchaeus, for example, "*who was a chief tax collector.... and (Jesus) said to him, 'Zacchaeus, make haste ... for today I must stay at your house'*" (Luke 19:2-5).

In Matthew 18:17 Jesus does not give instruction to close the door on the excommunicated. Rather, His wish is that the wayward covenant child remains the object of one's interest, love, and admonition. This attitude of Christ is what the Form for Excommunication urge us to imitate. After a member has been excommunicated, the Consistory addresses the congregation with these words, "*We exhort you, beloved Christians, not to look on him (her) as an enemy. On the contrary, try to warn him (her) as a brother (sister). But do not associate with him (her), that he (she) may be ashamed and come to repentance.*" This is a scriptural exhortation derived from 2 Thessalonians 3:14,15, where Paul writes to the Thessalonians, "*And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.*" Though there is to be distance between ourselves and the excommunicated member, he must remain the object of our loving admonition. The purpose of excommunication is and remains the repentance of the sinner.

6.4 Purpose Achieved

The Church Order reckons with the gracious reality of such repentance, and so Article 75 stipulates the procedure to be followed when a sinner (who was a communicant member) does repent and seeks to be reinstated as a member of the church.

ARTICLE 75 - Re-admission

When someone who has been excommunicated repents and desires to be again received into the communion of the church, the congregation shall be informed of this desire in order to see whether there are any lawful objections. The time between the public announcement and the re-admission of the sinner shall be not less than one month. If no lawful objection is raised the re-admission shall take place, with the use of the adopted Form.

The congregation is to be given a minimum of one month's notice to raise any lawful objections to the sinner's readmission. This is not to make it difficult for the sinner, but to ensure that the sinner's repentance is indeed genuine. See Article 72. The announcement made to the congregation acknowledges repentance as a fruit of excommunication: "*Beloved in the Lord: In the year ... brother (sister) _____ was excommunicated from the Church of Christ. The consistory may now inform you with gratitude that **this remedy has borne fruit.***" Notice that here, again, the congregation is involved by way of consistory announcing the sinner's repentance to the congregation.

6.5 Discipline of Non-communicant Members

Non-communicant members, like communicant members, are included in God's covenant, and therefore have all the riches of Christ promised to them. Given what God has done for them and to them, it follows that they must in due time respond to their baptism with faith in Jesus Christ. By the grace of God, many do and so also live a life of service to God. Some, however, do not. By their conduct or their lack of faith they show themselves to be unbelieving and ungodly. Can such persons continue indefinitely to belong to Christ's body?

The answer is negative. Christ's body is holy, and therefore must be holy. The aims of church discipline are valid for the non-communicant sinner too. Granted, he has not made profession of the faith, and so cannot be approached in a manner identical to those who have voiced the vow of faith. The churches have agreed on the following procedure:

ARTICLE 79 - Discipline in respect of non-communicant members

A baptised member shall be admonished by the consistory when he as an adult fails to make public profession of faith or where in other respects he is not loyal to the calling to new obedience in God's covenant. If he obstinately rejects the admonition of the consistory and thereby clearly demonstrates that he is indifferent and averse to the covenant or is even hostile to the service of the Lord, the matter shall be made known to the congregation without mentioning the name of the sinner; and the congregation shall be urged to pray for him. If the member continues in sin and is unwilling to listen to the admonitions, then with the advice of the classis the consistory shall make a second public announcement, mentioning the name of the sinner and the term after which the excommunication shall take place. If he does not in the said term show any real repentance, the consistory shall in a church service exclude him from the communion of the church, using the adopted Form. If he, after this excommunication, comes to repentance and desires to rejoin the communion of the church, he shall be admitted by way of his public profession of faith after the consistory has made his repentance known to the congregation.

As stated above, a non-communicant member can be admonished by the consistory for failing to make public profession of faith or if he fails to live as an obedient covenant child. However, since he has not promised allegiance to God through public profession of faith, the second announcement as pertains to communicant members has been omitted. Instead, the church proceeds directly (of course, after an interval of time) to the sinner's excommunication. Here, too, though, excommunication is not the end of the matter. The aim remains the repentance of this wayward covenant child. For the non-communicant member readmission is by way of public profession of faith.

7 SIN AMONGST OFFICE-BEARERS

The men whom God calls to office in His church have need of God's saving work as much as anyone else. They are as inclined to evil and are as inclined to refuse to repent from sin as anyone else. The Bible gives ample evidence of office-bearers who fell into sin. There was King David who refused to repent of his sin of adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11,12); the disciple Peter who denied his Lord three times (Matthew 26:69-75); the apostle Peter who erred in doctrine (Galatians 2:11ff); the sons of Aaron who burnt unholy fire (Leviticus 10:1-3); the many kings of Israel and Judah of whom it is written, "*and he did evil in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his fathers had done.*"

7.1 Manner of Discipline

How, though, ought the church to deal with office bearers who fell into grievous sin? The following is agreed:

ARTICLE 76 - Suspension and deposition of office-bearers

If a minister, elder or deacon has committed a public or otherwise gross sin, or refuses to heed the admonitions by the consistory, he shall be suspended from office by the judgment of his own consistory and of the consistory of a neighbouring congregation. In

the case of a minister this neighbouring congregation shall be appointed by the classis. If he hardens himself in the sin, or if the sin committed is of such a nature that he can not continue in office, an elder or a deacon shall be deposed by the judgment of the above-mentioned consistories. Classis, with the advice of the deputies of synod, shall judge whether a minister is to be deposed.

Why must an office-bearer be suspended from office immediately? Why doesn't a time element come into play here as in Articles 73 and 79? The holiness of the church of the Lord is one factor. That a known leader has given himself to gross sin gives cause to deride the good name of the Lord. More, by definition a leader is to be followed. If a leader in the congregation gives himself to sin and no consequence follows with respect to his leadership, the flock shall feel free to follow his bad example. For the sake of the holiness of the flock, then, the office bearer who has become delinquent in doctrine or conduct must be dealt with strictly and swiftly. Paul told the elders at Ephesus in Acts 20:28 to **"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."** Why did Paul urge the elders at Ephesus to "take heed of themselves"? For the very reason that they must reckon with the reality that they, like any other person, are indeed capable of falling into sin. Should they fall into sin, what is to come of the flock? If the elders become wolves the flock will be scattered. Yet it was not for scattering that Christ laid down His life for the flock.

Where an office bearer has fallen to grievous sin, the consistory which appointed the brother to office also suspends him from office. In Article 76 one does not read of the congregation's involvement as in Articles 73 and 79. However, a consistory may not suspend an office-bearer on its own accord. An office-bearer **"shall be suspended from office by the judgment of his own consistory and of the consistory of a neighbouring congregation. In the case of a minister this neighbouring congregation shall be appointed by the classis."** No consistory may act unilaterally; the judgment of a neighbouring church must be sought to safeguard against consistories getting rid of office-bearers for unlawful reasons, be they personality clashes or otherwise. Since a minister also plays a role within a bond of churches, classis plays a larger role in his suspension and deposition than for elders and deacons. Suspension from office gives the office-bearer the opportunity to repent, but if there is no repentance or the nature of the sin warrants it, an office-bearer must be deposed simply because the congregation needs to be protected.

7.2 Which Sins require Suspension

Article 77 mentions specific sins which are grounds for the suspension or deposition of office-bearers:

ARTICLE 77 - Serious and gross sins on the part of office-bearers

As serious and gross sins which are grounds for the suspension or deposition of office-bearers the following are to be mentioned particularly: False doctrine or heresy, public schisms, blasphemy, simony, faithless desertion of office or intrusion upon that of another, perjury, adultery, fornication, theft, acts of violence, habitual drunkenness, brawling, unjustly enriching oneself; and further all such sins and serious misdemeanours that rate as ground for excommunication with respect to other members of the church.

Also in cases of church discipline, be it in favour of or against the sinner, people's emotions can stand in the way of determining correctly what is sin or not. That helps to explain why a list of sins is mentioned here. Regardless of one's personal connections with the sinner (as was also the case in Deuteronomy 13:6), sin must be labelled as the sin it is, and judged accordingly.

7.3 Mutual Discipline

Office-bearers also need to engage in mutual discipline, speaking frankly with each other concerning the sins they see in each other's work. That office-bearers have an obligation towards each other was already stated in Articles 16 and 20 which describe the tasks of ministers and elders respectively.

"(Ministers) shall watch over their fellow office-bearers" and "(elders) shall watch that their fellow office-bearers are faithful in carrying out their duties" This is carried further in Article 78 as follows:

ARTICLE 78 - Christian censure

The ministers, elders, and deacons shall mutually exercise Christian censure and shall exhort and kindly admonish one another with regard to the execution of their office.

Office bearers are common, average people, quite able to be negligent in their God-given task of looking after the flock of the Lord. To ensure that the flock for which Christ shed His blood be tended as best as is humanly possible, every effort ought to be made to encourage one another to carry out the office to the best of one's ability. Hence Christian censure is an item that appears regularly on consistory agendas. If necessary, office bearers admonish each other on points of doctrine or conduct to ensure that the offices are carried out in obedient and faithful service to God.
