

CHURCH ORDER PROBLEMS

Presbyterian or Reformed?

In the editorial “The Invisible Church View: A Barrier to Unity,” (a) we noted that the Orthodox Presbyterian Church’s (OPC) Form of Government (FOG) clearly affirms the concept of the invisible church, and consequently also accommodates the unscriptural practice of pluralism or pluriformity of the church. Many people have, on the basis of a superficial or cursory reading of the Westminster Confession, contested or challenged this conclusion. However, what may indeed have remained unclear or obscure in our casual perusal of the Westminster Confession, is clearly confirmed by a closer look at the OPC’s Form of Government (FOG).

This is also the case in our discussions about church polity. Many people have erroneously assumed that there is very little difference between Presbyterian and Reformed church polity; between the Presbyterian Form of Government (FOG) and our Reformed Church Order (CO). Consistory and Session, Classis and Presbytery are assumed to be different names for the same thing. A closer look at the OPC’s FOG, however, shows that the Presbyterian and Reformed polities differ significantly on a good number of points. It is therefore important that we take a somewhat closer look.

When we turn to chapter 14 of the Form of Government (FOG), we find the title: “The Regional Church and Its Presbytery.” As people of Reformed persuasion we, no doubt, will ask: What is this “regional church.”? The OPC’s FOG supplies us with the answer: “A regional church consists of all the members of the local congregations and the ministers within a certain district. The general assembly may organize a regional church when there are at least four congregations, two ministers, and two ruling elders, within a region” (XIV.1). We also read that the Presbytery is the “governing body of a regional church” (XIV. 2), and we note that the presbytery has the same power over local churches as the session (comparable to our local consistory/council, RD) has over members of the congregation. We also read in the FOG the following:

“The Presbytery has the power to order whatever pertains to the spiritual welfare of the churches under its care...” The Presbytery has responsibility for “evangelism within the bounds of its region...”, and has the power to “organize and receive congregations... unite and dissolve congregations... examine and approve or censure the records of church sessions” (XIV.5). Furthermore, we are informed that “all governing assemblies have the same kinds of rights and powers” (XII.1).

In an article titled “Presbyterian or Reformed?” (b), the power of the presbytery is clearly and coherently explained. We can properly say, quoting this article, that the “local churches and their sessions are completely subservient to the regional church and its presbytery. Presbytery is not confined to matters of appeal, or to matters concerning the churches as a whole, or with what the local churches bring to it. Instead, presbytery can order whatever it deems pertains to the well-being of the churches under its care. Moreover, all actions of the local session which are recorded in its minutes must be approved by presbytery. If presbytery does not approve, the local session must either change, or appeal to General Assembly.” We see that the power given to the presbytery

under the OPC's FOG reaches far beyond what our Reformed Church Order, based on scripture, provides for or allows.

Our next point of difference is the fact that "presbytery never ceases to exist. As the session of the regional church, its power and existence are not confined to its meetings. Although the regional church has no worship services and administers no sacraments, it is considered to be a real and full church in the biblical sense. (c) The local congregation is not a church in the real and full sense, but part of the regional church. Thus although the marks of the church are not present at a 'regional' level, inasmuch as they are present on the local level, they are ascribed to the regional church. Further, the regional church itself is merely part of the 'whole church,' for you find in chapter 15 (FOG) a discussion of 'The whole Church and Its General Assembly.' Clearly, then, there can be no autonomy of the local church since the 'whole church' exists only at the highest level. Thus, as you go higher, or to more board assemblies, within the church court structure, you also find more power and authority. The structure of the OPC's government is federalist. Power emanates from the top down, for it is at the top that you find the widest representation. The lower levels are guaranteed what protection the 'constitution' affords." (d)

In Chapter VI of the OPC's FOG we become acquainted with the rather unique situation in which a minister is not a member of the congregation of which he is a minister. There we read: "Every minister shall be a member of a regional church and has communicant fellowship in any local congregation of that regional church. The presbytery with the concurrence of a ministerial member, may request a session within its bounds to exercise pastoral care over him in its behalf..." (VI 4)

Quoting once again from the article "Presbyterian or Reformed?" we take note of several things: "The minister is a member of the regional church and so has communicant fellowship in all of the local congregations under the control of the presbytery. Pastoral care for a minister belongs to the presbytery which may, or may not delegate it to a local session. The local session does not have jurisdiction over the minister of the Word. The minister is a member of presbytery and may only be disciplined by presbytery. Presbytery, as the governing body of the regional church may call men to be evangelists, or teachers... or 'in some other specific way, such as writing or editing in the field of Christian religious education' (FOG IX). These men are ministers called by Presbytery and directly responsible to presbytery. No local church is involved in calling these ministers. As a result, theological professors, Christian school teachers, and assorted ecclesiastical bureaucrats are full voting members of presbytery. They are not delegated to presbytery by a local church, but they are members of presbytery. They are not members of a local church... First, last, and always, they are members of that regional church which has neither worship services nor the sacraments.

Finally, we must conclude that the relationship between the presbytery and the local session is, at least, implicitly hierarchical. Such was the design from the time of the Westminster Assembly on... Theoretically, all ministers and ruling elders of the local churches constitute the presbytery of the regional church. In reality, however, when the presbytery meets, all men called by the presbytery in specific ways and all ministers may vote, but only one ruling elder from each congregation may vote." (e)

Our Committee for Contact with the OPC (CCOPC) wrote to the OPC Committee: “As to the divergencies in Church-polity... the differences in church government as reflected in your Form of Government and our Church Order are ultimately based on a difference in the understanding of the relation between the local Churches and the Church universal. The Church order proceeds from the principle of completeness and ‘autonomy’ of the local Churches that in the unity of faith voluntarily enter into a federation of Churches. The Form of Government is based on the principle that the Church universal has precedence over the local Churches, which are actually parts of it.” (FOG II 2, 3) (f)

“Here again we see the results of the Westminster doctrine of the church. The Westminster Standards place an unwholesome emphasis upon the universal church, conceived of as the aggregate of credible confessors, and the invisible church, conceived of as the aggregate of the elect wherever they may be found. If the real visible church is the total of true confessors, inside or outside the presbyterian communion, then the local church is not seen as the origin of authority in church government. Instead the local church is merely a ‘slice of the pie’ called the visible church. The government of the OPC is not Reformed and biblical, but it is collegialist. (a church having a college or chapter/body of clergy; administered by several clergy or ministers jointly, RD)

The notion of church and its government is far different from the view set forth in the Three Forms of Unity. Here the emphasis is placed on the gathering work of Christ and on the responsibility of the Christian to assemble himself with Christ’s flock. The church in view here is always visible, always the church with an address. Hence the local church takes on a much greater importance. It is the place of Christ’s gathering work; it is the place to which the believer must join himself. Until this fundamental difference is resolved, the two traditions will go their separate ways in terms of church government.” (g)

When we read Article 50 of our Church Order about “the relation with Churches abroad” we note that “on minor points of Church Order and ecclesiastical practice Churches abroad shall not be rejected.” This statement leads us to a rather pertinent question: Are then the differences (divergencies) between the OPC’s Form of Government and our Church Order only of minor significance? After taking a somewhat closer look we cannot but conclude that the differences are indeed of major. The church government of the OPC is not Reformed and biblical. It is implicitly hierarchical. The Presbyterian and Reformed polities differ significantly on a number of crucial points. We cannot and we may not remain indifferent to these differences. If we do, we only compound and perpetuate the problems.

We concluded our discussion about ““The Invisible Church View” (g) with the statement that we must help “those who are searching.” We must “sound forth the truth - boldly, clearly, and consistently.” Consequently, also in matters of church polity and church government, we must clearly present and defend the Reformed and biblical position. We simply cannot sanction or endorse Presbyterian Church polity. If we sincerely desire unity and church union with the OPC we must indeed speak the truth in love. We must truly fight for truth. Quoting Rudolf Van Reest, “Church reformers are not people who fight for unity, but people who fight for truth. The unity that follows is the fruit of their struggle.” (h) Let us then not cease to work and pray for that unity; that

unity which is based on a common confession of the truth, also in matters of church polity and church government.

Ron Dykstra

(a)(g) The Invisible Church View: A Barrier to Unity, Ron Dykstra, Reformed Polemics, April 1/98.

(b)(d)(e)(g) Prebyterian or Reformed?, K.A.Kok.

(c) This explains why the Presbyterians present at the ICRC meeting had no problem proposing the celebration of the Lord's Supper; after all, if presbytery is a church, why not a conference as well?

(f) Acts, Gen. Synod 1974, p. 105.

(h) Schilder's Struggle for the Unity of the Church, Rudolf Van Reest, p. 404.

The Mystery about the Catholic Christian Church

The Church is Christ's Stable

The question with which Lord's Day 21 begins from deep within the heart of many Christians, "What do you believe concerning the catholic Christian Church?" The Church is something that you believe, but you cannot see. She is the total sum of all who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. They can be members of all types of churches and they are spread throughout the world. And all these believers together form the catholic Christian Church - The True, Ideal Church. You can't see that Church, she has no address, is invisible: because her members are everywhere and nowhere. That's also why we say that we believe the Church. We believe that she exists and that she is being gathered, but we cannot point her out with a finger. Anyone who would do so forgets that she is an object of faith. We may not apply what Lord's Day 21 says about the Church to our own local congregation. When we do that we act haughtily because Lord's Day 21 speaks about the Church in a manner which you cannot apply to human local groups and Churches; it is the Church which Christ gathers and He alone can see.

This type of talk sounds very nice, but is completely wrong; for the Catechism is not speaking about a dream Church where members do not know one another. Rather, in answer 55, the Catechism tells us that each member is called to help the other members. From this it appears that our teaching manual is not speaking about an invisible Church at all. In order to help one another we need to know and meet each other. Then the Church must also be visible and identifiable.

If, then, the Church is indeed visible and identifiable, why do we still say, "I believe the catholic Christian Church?" Is she then still an object of faith? The answer is, "Because she is a work of the Lord Jesus Christ." And a work of the Lord can only be seen by faith. What the Lord said to Martha at Lazarus' grave also counts for the Church: "Did I not tell you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?" (John 11:40) Only those who look with the eyes of faith understand the mystery of the Church. Such a one sees beyond men and what men do. He sees what the Lord is doing, how he gathers his people, brings them together by his Spirit and Word.

When we then want to know what the Church is we must open the Bible and see what happens to the people in the Bible. The Church is not a club, that we as people, bring together, nor an organization that is held together by people. The Church is the work of Christ, the Great and Good Shepherd. He calls the sheep and gathers them in his stable. Now that is why the beginning of Lord's Day 21 is so beautiful. The Catechism does not begin with what people do, but it begins with Christ. It is the Son of God who gathers, defends and preserves His Church. Only in this manner does the Church come into existence. Only in this manner do people gather together, only in this manner can they form a congregation.

Happily the Catechism also touches on the matter of election here. It speaks of a congregation that has been chosen to everlasting life. Our teaching manual seldom speaks about election, but here it does so very specifically and correctly. Out of God's eternal decree of election, from the very heart of God, the church comes into existence. Christ does not gather indiscriminately but He gathers all whom the Father has given Him. He focuses with precision on God's eternal decree. As the obedient Son he gathers into His stable all those who the Father, in His love, from before the foundation of the world, has known. Yes, He does that through His Spirit and Word.

Note that the Catechism mentions Spirit first - through His Spirit and Word. That is not merely coincidence, for we are in the section of the Catechism that deals with the work of the Holy Spirit. This Lord's Day, too, falls under the heading that you find above Lord's Day 20, "God the Holy Spirit and our Sanctification". On Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended to earth to devote Himself to Christ's work. He uses His divine power to guide the sheep to Christ's stable. He makes Himself completely submissive to the congregation that Jesus wants to gather here on earth.

When we speak about the Holy Spirit we are, at the same time, speaking about His activity, the preaching, the proclamation of the Holy Gospel. That is the means through which the Holy Spirit works. That's how He conquers the hearts of men. That's how He extricates sheep for the stable of the great and good Shepherd. See, that's what the Lord Jesus meant when, in Caesarea Philippi, he said to Simon Peter, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church". Peter had just confessed Him to be Christ, Son of the living God. Now on this witness, the confessing Peter, Christ will build his congregation. The Church comes about because people begin to listen to the words of Peter and to maintain them.

"I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." This word of Jesus also gives answer to the burning question of "Where do I find that Church of which is spoken here, in Lord's Day 21; how do I know that I am in the stable of the good Shepherd?" The answer need not be difficult. Christ's Church is there where people indeed allow themselves to be built on Peter, the rock; on the witness of the Apostles; on the Word which Peter and the other Apostles have proclaimed.

Of the young Church in Jerusalem we read in Acts 2 that "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." With that the most important aspect of the Church has been addressed. That is how you can identify the Church - it is where one builds on the words of the Apostles, it's where Christ is building, that's not merely a work of men, but that's where the Son of God is gathering.

Of course I realize that our Catechism also speaks about the Sacraments and Church Discipline as marks by which the true Church can be identified. But these two marks are inseparably connected

to the first, the most important mark: the pure preaching of the Word. For when one maintains the pure preaching of the Word it follows that the sacraments and church discipline will be properly maintained.

The question is often raised why faith and love are not mentioned as marks of the Church. Ought not Christ's congregation to be a house of love and ought not faith to typify the life of the congregation? Of course this ought to be so. But faith and love are so difficult to measure. Calvin says in his Institutes that God has given us more sure marks by which to know the Church. And so it is. Purity of the preaching can be clearly established. There need not be uncertainty about whether the preaching builds on the words of the Apostles. He who has ears can hear that for himself.

When together we are convinced that by grace we are being gathered together and built up on the foundation of the Apostles that our congregation may display the marks of the true Church, then we should take that very seriously. Then we can say nothing else but that this is where the great Shepherd is gathering, here He builds His Church. Then we may not neglect the coming together of this gathering and seek our spiritual strengthening elsewhere. One who begins his Sunday with "Where can I be built up the most?" or "Where can I find the most warmth?" or "Where can I find a word to comfort my heart?" begins completely incorrectly because he begins with himself, with his own needs, his own desires. But we ought to begin each Sunday with Christ. The great question is, "Where does Christ gather His Church, where is His stable, where does He call me to gather with His people?"

When we did profession of our faith we also answered that question. We did that in a Reformed Church and not anywhere else. We did that because we believed that it was not merely a work of man but a work of the Son of God. We stood before God and His holy congregation and then we professed our faith. We must continue to take that seriously. If our congregation is indeed God's holy congregation (as we have confessed when we did public profession of our faith), Church of Jesus Christ, then it is our duty to remain a member of her, then I may not withhold myself from her gatherings, then I must submit myself to her instruction and discipline.

You can not substitute for the Church of Jesus Christ. You can do that with at television, if you don't like one channel you can substitute with another that speaks more to your interest at that moment, but that is not something you may do with the Church, sit here in the morning and somewhere else in the afternoon. If your local congregation is indeed God's holy congregation then that is where you belong. Then that is where you have to deal with Christ.

The confusion concerning Lord's Day 21 is widespread. Many consider it to be the peak of humility when they say that they don't know where the Church is, that it is everywhere and nowhere. But it is the peak of blindness. For the Church is identifiable and visible, the stable of Christ can be found. Do you think that the Good Shepherd would let His sheep wander aimlessly about? Oh, when we are allowed to be Church of Christ then that does not give reason for pride or haughtiness, but it gives us reason for astonishment that we, foolish, sinful, stubborn people who became obedient have been deemed worthy to follow the Lamb. Through grace you have been saved. Let us emphasize that word every time we speak about the Church. Any glory for man is

excluded. It is, after all, impossible for man to glory in himself, even a little, when it is free grace that he receives.

First part of a sermon by emeritus minister, Dr. A. N. Hendriks of the Reformed Church (Liberated) at Amersfoort, the Netherlands (Translated with permission by PdB)

Understanding Scripture

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PSALTER³

In the previous two articles we spoke about David's intimate involvement with the Book of Psalms and how they were an integral part of the priestly liturgy. All of this is important, if we want to understand the Psalms properly. None of the Psalms are about the individual affairs of the common believer. They are not the songs of every man. We are dealing with David and his house with whom God renewed His covenant and to whom God made the promise that we read in 2 Samuel 7:

“When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendent after you, who will come forth from you and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My Name and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My loving-kindness shall not depart from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever, your throne shall be established forever” (verses 12-16).

God promised David a son, a son whose house and whose kingdom would endure before God, and whose throne would be established forever.

And if this is the context for the Book of Psalms, if David is the one who is behind the Psalter, behind the music of praise - the Temple of praise, we might say, - then it would be strange, almost perverse, if the Psalms were not directed to use by and for the House of David at the House of Yahweh. This son of David, this promised one, is the subject of the Psalms. The Psalms are royal songs. David's kingship is a new creation and God builds a house of people around David. Have you ever wondered why David's “last song,” which is about the establishment of his house by God, is followed by the list of his mighty men (2 Sam. 23)? Well, that is because David's house is a house of people! There are three main mighty men who function as foundation stones. Who is the fourth cornerstone? Why, David himself!⁵

Now, like all the Old Testament leaders, David falls into sin and threatens the kingdom. He commits adultery and murder; he does not give just judgment, either within his family or within the kingdom. Yet, Yahweh is faithful and He establishes David's song. Have you ever wondered about the statement at the end of Psalm 72 that the “songs of David, the son of Jesse, are at an end”? We do not usually pay too much attention to that; we do not even sing it in the metrical version of the Psalm. After all, in Psalms 73 - 150, we find a whole bunch of Psalms written by David. What could it mean that the songs of David are at an end? Well, Psalm 72 is the Psalm of David's son, Solomon, and it is the Psalm about the rule of the great king. The conclusion or verse

20 means that although David has fallen, although David cannot build Yahweh's House, although David is not the promised son through whom these blessings come, yet God has established the song of David.

The Psalms are not the spiritual autobiography of the believer. We should not sing them because we say, 'Oh, I know just how the Psalmist feels in Psalm 32. I, too, have had my strength dried up as by the summer's heat!' What if you have not had that experience? Is that normative? Do you try to pull it up by singing? Do we also sing "Vindicate me, O LORD, for I have walked in my integrity; And I have trusted in the LORD without wavering" (Ps. 26:1) because we identify with the experience? This individualistic singing of the Psalms is why many people have problems with the curses in the Psalms and why the "historical" Psalms (except for the introductions and conclusions) frequently go unsung. We narrow the Psalms down to morphology of the soul and then we trivialize even that. Not many of us have been on our sickbed, near death, and had all of our family and friends mocked us and deny us. Yet, Psalm 41 speaks of this; the only way we can apply it directly to ourselves is to trivialize it.

We do not sing the Psalms because we can identify with what is going on in the Psalms, or, more particularly, what we assume to be the emotions being expressed. That is sentimentalism, not piety, and it is not what is going on in the Psalms. If we think about it, it would seem the height of creaturely arrogance to come into God's Presence and sing about ourselves. It is even more arrogant to assume God's revelation of Himself could be appropriated in that way. The Psalter is a temple of praise for the House of David. The laments do not refer to everyday sufferings, but to the sufferings of the Son of David. He is the Anointed One Who suffers on behalf of the kingdom of God; He is the One Who wrestles with God in prayer. And with the failure of the kingship, a failure so complete that after the exile, the crown is turned over to the High Priest to hold in trust (see Zech. 6:9-15), the Psalms point to the hope of the final son of David, Who is worthy to pray and to sing these Psalms⁶. No one would dare apply sufferings of Psalm 22 to himself directly, but we freely do it with other Psalms. Why?

It is not our spiritual longing that is at issue in the Psalms. They are the prayers of God's Anointed king. This means that the Psalms are ultimately the prayers of Jesus Christ. The Psalms are His prayer book. He is the subject of all the Psalms. Only Jesus Christ is the true King Who suffers for righteousness. Only Jesus Christ is the true King Who emerges victorious over the hatred of all evil. And as our Head, He represents us in these prayers. As the One Who bore our sins, He confesses our sins in the Psalms. As the One Who is our righteousness, He confesses that He has walked apart from sin. As the One Who judges the living and the dead, He announces His curses against the wicked. Jesus Christ is the "I" of the Psalms; we are not, except in Him⁷. In Him, we are made sons of God, a royal priesthood, and so we rightly pray these prayers along with our representative Head. But we must always sing them with and in Him, and never as our "spiritual autobiography."

We do not have Messianic Psalms - a few Psalms here and there that in various places refer to the work of Christ. We have a Messianic Psalter. Augustine said about the Psalms and Christ, "Him first, Him last, Him midst and without end."⁸ We have to see, first of all, who speaks in the Psalms, and that speaker is not the individual believer, but the Anointed of God, David and his sons,

looking, especially, to the coming Great Son of David. Truly, when Jesus Christ sings the Psalms it is the Author singing His own Psalms⁹. Then we have to see that the Psalter is the house, or temple, of praise for God. The Psalter represents the organization of the people of God as the heavenly host under the priesthood. The Temple built by Solomon is just the architectural form of the Psalter - The Psalter and the people who are joined in its praise are the real Temple of Yahweh.

Notes:

5 Jesus Christ also seems to have had three mighty men; Peter, James, and John. He, Himself, of course, is the Chief Cornerstone. And, as Great David's Greater Son, He, too, builds a House of people.

6 Waltke, pp. 14f.

7 James E. Adams, War Psalms of the Prince of Peace (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1991), pp.21-36.

8 Cited by Waltke, p. 4.

9 "The Author Sings His Own Psalms" is the title of K. Schilder's chapter on Matthew 26:30 in Christ in His Sufferings, trans. H. Zylstra, (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Klock & Klock, 1978 [1938]), pp. 269-286.

Note from the Editors:

This is the last of four issues of Reformed Polemics that comes to you unsolicited. It was our intention to make you aware of what we are doing and to bring several matters of importance to you for consideration. We hope and pray that the material you have received may be to the glory of God and to the edification of our readers. We also desire that our readers work with the material we supply within their own sphere of reference.

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We wish to thank all those who have encouraged us and, in so many ways, helped us improve the looks of our product and made this campaign possible. We also want to express deep gratitude to those who share in our vision and help us by submitting material.

Above all, we express extreme gratitude to our heavenly Father Who gives us the strength to do this work and to continue in it.