

“THE MARKS OF SPIRITUAL GOVERNMENT.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Sermon Texts: I Corinthians 14:33, 40; Ephesians 1:20-23

Belgic Confession Article 30

Introduction:

There's an old joke about a fellow inviting a friend to church and the friend declines saying he's against organized religion, to which the inviter says well then you should definitely come to our church because it's real disorganized.

The purpose of church government is for things to be done decently and in good order. Where there is no government there is chaos and confusion, and the possibility for abuse, tyranny and neglect.

Consider Somalia as an example of no government.

Consider North Korea as an example of oppressive, tyrannical government.

Consider Nigeria where some are trying to overthrow the government.

People cannot dwell together very long without some kind of order or law or rule or government. Good government is built on the principle that all men are sinners and sin needs to be kept in check. Our political government was set up with checks and balances because our founders had a very high view of sin and the depravity of human hearts.

Tonight we come to a topic that isn't one of the most exciting or appealing but is nevertheless an important and necessary doctrine of Scripture, the government of Christ's Church.

In the last article we talked about the three marks of a true and faithful church. This article talks about how those three marks may be carried out. To have those three marks the church must have leaders, office-bearers, men responsible for seeing that they are done decently and in good order.

Let's state two fundamental overarching principles first.

The Head of the Church is Jesus Christ.

This past Thursday was Ascension Day, forty days after Easter and ten days before Pentecost, the day Jesus bodily, physically ascended from earth to heaven by the power of God. In heaven He is seated on the throne at the right hand of the Father, who has given to Jesus all dominion and authority.

Ephesians 1:20-23 ...[God] raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22 And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Jesus is now the glorified head of the Church, His Body. Christ is the great high priest and the chief shepherd. Christ has all power and authority over His Church and He directly rules it by His Word and by His Spirit.

Because Christ is the churches Savior, He is now her Lord.

Ephesians 5:23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.

Colossians 1:18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

No one can usurp His place, His role, or His authority. No pope, no bishop, no pastor, no synod.

It is wrong for the Pope to call himself the Vicar of Christ, meaning Christ's substitute on earth. It is wrong for the Queen of England to be called the head of the Church of England. It is wrong whenever the word of a Senior Pastor is put ahead of the Word of God. It is wrong when some churches elevate titles, Elder Smith, Deacon Jones.

Jesus will share His glory with no other.

The Work of the Church is Ministry.

The primary or principle work of the church is the ministry of the members in worship, fellowship and witness.

Ephesians 4:11-12 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,

The church doesn't exist for the sake of the council. The council exists for the sake of the church. Church government is for the larger purpose of enabling ministry. We need spiritual leaders to equip us and lead us and help us so the work of the church gets done.

The Necessity of Church Government.

In heaven there will be no need for pastors and elders and deacons because Jesus will be visibly present and on the throne. How does this earthly body have order and structure and discipline when its divine head is in heaven and physically absent from the earth?

God has not sent Jesus back to be our pastor or elder. God has not sent angels to be our pastors and elders. The church on earth is a divinely ordained but very human institution made up of real people who are to relate to each other as family, as brothers and sisters.

Just as our homes have a structure and order with a husband and father as the head and the father and mother as parents over children, so the earthly reality of the church must have real structure and order. Jesus indirectly rules His Church through those He sets apart to represent Him as under-shepherds.

We also need it because we are sinners. Without good government and checks and balances strong personalities or popular leaders or forceful bullies might hold the day.

Forms of government.

There is generally no debate that churches should have some structure, some form of government so that things will be done decently and in order. Where there is great debate is over what form this government should take.

There are generally speaking three kinds of church government used in different denominations today and they all reflect a different form of civil government.

Top-down, hierarches.

Some churches have a strict monarchy, such as the Roman Catholic Church with the Pope as its head. One of his titles is Vicar of Christ, meaning representative or substitute.

The Eastern Orthodox churches are under an oligarchy, like a monarchy but with four patriarchs instead of one pope.

Some Protestant denominations have variations of a kind of hierarchical government under a bishop. We refer to these as having an episcopal form of government, meaning rule by bishop or overseer. Examples of this are seen in the Anglicans under the Archbishop of Canterbury. Methodist and some Lutherans have a hierarchical form with bishops. For instance in the Methodist church the bishop decides which ministers will serve where and for how long.

In this system the congregation has no real share in the government or affairs of their own church.

Against this form of government are the words of Jesus:

Luke 22:25-26 And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. 26 But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.

Bottom-up, independents.

Reacting completely against this system are the Baptists, Congregationalists, Disciples of Christ, and many independent, fundamentalists and Pentecostal churches that hold to a system of government called congregationalism. Each church is completely independent and self-governing. The pastor has limited authority, the laity rule the church, with many decisions going to congregational meetings. They are very much opposed to authority being concentrated in the hands of one ruling body or one person.

Decisions can too easily be based on what a simple majority wants, not necessarily what Scripture teaches. Pastors can often be seen as just hired hands who can be lightly dismissed almost on a whim.

These churches often refuse to associate with other churches so they don't reflect the unity of the church to the world.

Elder led, representative, shepherd model.

Calvin considered these two systems to be two ditches on a road. He feared the rule of one and the rule of all, mob rule.

The Presbyterian or Reformed system of government seeks more balance. The elders, elected by the congregation, for a representative kind of government. And the churches are not completely independent or autonomous. They submit to the authority of Classis and Synod in some matters.

The system of elder rule seems to fit with the covenantal continuity we see between the OT and the NT. The Israelite people of God in the OT were governed by elders. The Jewish people of the first century were governed by elders and when they gathered in their larger assembly it was called the Sanhedrin. The NT church just naturally carried the rule of elders forward.

The Reasons for Church Government.

Article 30 outlines four reasons:

Preservation of True Religion.

The preservation of true religion is no easy task. All true religion has the fiercest of enemies. Our weapons are spiritual weapons engage in spiritual warfare. Remember Paul's warnings and urgings in Ephesians 6 about putting on the whole armor of God.

The deacons preserve true religion by caring for and visiting orphans and widows.

James 1:27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Propagation of True Doctrine.

Jude 3-4 Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. 4 For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Acts 20:20-21 I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, 21 testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Psalms 78:4 We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.

Elders and pastors preserve true religion by proclaiming the truth to all generations, by rightly dividing the Word and guarding the good deposit. We do this by upholding subscription to the confessions of our faith.

Punishment of Transgressors.

We won't take time for this now but will consider it in Article 32 in two weeks.

Relief and Comfort of the Poor and Distressed.

The Deacons are the front line of the ministries of mercy, but they certainly aren't the only ones. We all share in the manifesting of this kind of love and care. Our Fellowship Ministry Team gives us all opportunities share a meal with those in need.

By this means ...

By this means the people of God may

Ephesians 4:15-16 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

And Decency and Good Order is promoted

I Corinthians 14:33 For God is not a God of confusion but of peace.

I Corinthians 14:40 But all things should be done decently and in order.

Good church order effect's our lives together and our unity together. It builds up and sustains and supports our fellowship and ministry together.

It's an expression of Jesus' love and care for us. He has not left us adrift, He has abandoned us to chaos.

God in His infinite wisdom and mercy has ordained for our benefit that we be ruled by a plurality of spiritual leaders called pastors, elders and deacons, so that everything will be done well and so that the unity of the church will be a witness in our world to the presence and power of Jesus Christ.

To Him belongs all glory in the church through all ages, world without end.