

“WE ARE BUT MEN: THE OFFICERS OF THE CHURCH.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Sermon Texts: Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; I Timothy 5:17; III John 1:9-10

Belgic Confession Article 31

Introduction:

It should be evident to us by now as we work through these articles of the Belgic Confession that deal with the practical governing of the church that this is where the rubber really met the road in the Reformation. While there were many important disagreements on doctrine, here is where the power and authority of the medieval European church was really challenged.

Article 31 deals with the very practical matters of who should the officers of the church be, how should they be chosen, how do they relate to each other and how is the church to relate to them.

Let's begin with the most basic and practical of questions. Why does the church need officers?

Why does the church need officers or spiritual leaders?

Clearly the Belgic Confession follows the lead of the Bible in teaching that we need spiritual leaders. Why does Scripture teach this?

Have you ever been in a group where there was no leadership, where no one wanted to suggest what should be done, where no one was willing to take any responsibility, where no one was willing to decide on a direction?

Imagine a school with no principal or a business with no boss or a team with no coach. Imagine the Potato Salad Ladies with no leader, no point of contact; or a Bible Study with no leader or teacher; or a youth group with no one to lead, guide, plan or organize.

We are but men. We are human and we need leaders, we need those in authority over us. Where two or more are gathered to accomplish any purpose there will need to be someone willing to step up and take responsibility and give some kind of direction.

And yes, it's also true that because we are human and fallen, we chaff at this notion. It's in vogue today to reject authority and cast off rulers and anyone who tells us what to do. Submission is a four letter word these days.

But the fact remains, we are but men and we all need leadership and we all need to submit to leadership.

So what does this leadership look like and how do they come to leadership?

The Office bearers of the Church.

Article 30 states “Churches ought to be governed according to the spiritual order that our Lord has taught in His Word.” According to Scripture there should be pastors and elders and deacons.

These three offices are similar to the three offices by which God led His people Israel, prophets, kings and priests and they correspond to three the offices which Christ fulfills, as prophet, priest and king. Elders rule and give counsel and in this way they are like kings. Pastors preach and exhort and in this way are like prophets. Deacons care for the needs of the flock and in this way resemble that role of priests.

Let’s look at these briefly.

Elders are the spiritual overseers of the church, responsible for all the preaching and teaching in the church, that sound doctrine be maintained; responsible for the careful administration of the sacraments; and responsible for the spiritual life of the members.

The unity of a church depends on two things, unity of doctrine and unity of practice. Elders are responsible to maintain and guard our unity in faith and practice, watching life and doctrine closely.

They are to watch their own life and doctrine closely, and to watch over the life and doctrine of the church.

Pastors or Ministers of the Word.

I Timothy 5:17 Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

This text shows that there are leaders among leaders, *some who are first among equals*. As Peter, James and John were first among the apostles and Philip and Stephen stood out from among the seven first deacons, so some elders excelled at preaching and teaching.

Not all elders are pastors, but all pastors must be elders in terms of qualifications, gifts, and ministry. Pastors are set apart to be vocational elders, full time paid elders who can labor exclusively in preaching, teaching and leading.

Deacons are called to serve the church in a special and particular capacity. While they are to be spiritual leaders (full of the Holy Spirit), they concern themselves particularly with the temporal and practical concerns of the church. It’s not a lessor role, but a different role. They give

particular attention to stewardship, benevolence, and needs for assistance. They are to give special attention to widows, orphans, the poor, and those suffering great needs.

This office is analogous to the OT priestly office, or at least the part of the priestly office that had to do with works of mercy and ministry to the poor, sick and needy.

It blesses me that at First CRC the deacons are real deacons, the deacons deac, they do the work of deacons and the elders are generally careful not to usurp the role and responsibility of the deacons. It helps that we have good deacons and they don't need a lot of oversight.

Choosing Spiritual Leadership

Before the time of the Reformation the members of the local churches had no say about who their spiritual leaders would be. The Reformation was a time when the rights of local congregations were championed.

In the Reformation the seeds for democracy were sown and out it came the form of government we have in our own country.

Presbyterian and Reformed church government has long held to the inalienable right of congregations to choose their own leaders.

Pastors or elders or deacons may sense an inward calling or an inward inclination to serve, but that calling must be confirmed by an outward affirmation through the vote of the church.

It's a sad note in our Dutch history and heritage that though we restored the Biblical practice of the churches choosing their leaders, we later lost it as the state and civil authorities in Holland usurped the role.

With prayer.

Acts 14:23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

There are many methods of choosing. By civil authorities, by appointment of a bishop, by lobbying of individuals, by asking favors of friends, by any manipulation, by buying the office.

In other words, elections in the church should not look like elections out in the world, campaigning, speeches, promises, lobbying, etc. Officers in the church should not be elected in any other way than through earnest prayer, "by calling on the name of the Lord." God by His Spirit is the one to guide the church, which is Christ's body.

This is why we cover our process in prayer from the evening of nominations all the way through to an evening prayer service, and prayer again before the voting and again before the drawing of the lots.

A pastor in our community called me this week to ask about our prayer service and if I would be willing to share with him what we did. He wanted to implement something similar in their church.

This also says that the process is to a spiritual one, that we want God to guide. This is a divine work, a divine calling, there needs to be a sense of God-appointedness about it from beginning to end.

We don't pre-cook the elections in a back room and then put on a show of a mock election. We don't stuff the ballot box or rig the elections or get down in the council room and close the doors and throw out the ballots and put in who we want or worse yet put in someone who has bribed or in some other way coerced or cheated the system. Believe me all of this and more has been done.

Should anyone aspiring to an office of spiritual leadership?

It depends. Remember Simon Magus' in Acts 8 who desired spiritual power and authority and offered to pay for it through bribery.

This practice has continued in the church and it's called "simony." It's the act of buying or selling church offices or roles. It's more common in hierarchical churches where a corrupt bishop or priest gets into power.

But the practice is among us Protestants in a varied form when we elect people just because they are rich or successful in business or famous.

I Timothy 3:1 The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.

I like Calvin's words here, "godly men desire it, not because they have any confidence in their own industry and virtue, but because they rely on God's help, who is our sufficiency, as Paul says elsewhere (II Cor. 3:5).

II Corinthians 3:5 Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God.

It is a high calling, a spiritual work, a work with huge responsibilities and fearful consequences, the watch care of souls. It is a difficult work and an excellent work.

So should a man seek or desire the office? If his desire or ambition is self-seeking then no. But godly men may offer themselves to the Lord's service and wait on Him to confirm it.

There are two calls, the internal call in a man's heart, and the external call of a congregation, the confirmation of the internal call.

I had an internal call and went to seminary. I didn't have an external call until the church in Cedar Grove, Wisconsin called me to be their pastor.

Plurality and Parity (equality) in the offices.

Churches are not ruled by one elder or one pastor. There is no church in the NT with only one elder or one pastor. The highest governing body in a church is the elder board, but no single elder can make binding decisions for the church, they rule collectively.

Scripture requires *plural* leadership, because men are sinners and need accountability. In the immortal words of English historian Lord Acton, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

The distribution of power provides a greater protection against abuses of authority. We see in our own civil government the practical wisdom of checks and balance.

There is only one time in the NT when sole or solitary leadership is mentioned in a church and in that one place it is soundly rebuked.

III John 1:9 I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. 10 ... And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.

There is another important benefit of having a plurality of elders and that is that the spiritual oversight of an entire congregation is too much for one man. It is taxing spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physical when one leader's span of care is too big. And the problems can be too many for one to handle, as Moses experienced in the wilderness.

But when you have a plurality of leaders who is over who? Article 31 teaches they all have the same power and authority. The word for this is *parity* which means equal or equality; on the same level.

The church of Jesus Christ has no hierarchy. Jesus is the only head. He alone is Lord. All submit to Him. All office bearers are servants of Christ. They are equal but different, different in roles and responsibility.

There is parity among the deacons, one with the other.

There is parity among the elders, one with the other.

There is parity among all pastors, one with the other.

This doesn't mean there can't be presidents and vice-presidents and moderators. There are necessary roles and responsibilities to get the work done.

But on council each officer has an equal voice and vote. No one man may exercise authority over another.

Some call the pastor the first among equals, and there is some warrant in giving honor to those who labor in preaching and teaching, but still equal voice and vote.

Respect for officers

There is another side of the leadership coin. The people also owe something to the leaders. They owe respect to the leaders they have faithfully elected to lead them.

Why are there many verses in the Bible about submitting to those in authority or submitting to those who are over us? Why are there verses about respecting and honoring those who rule over us?

Because it's hard to do and it goes against our nature and we are tempted to resist this. This is particularly hard when we know the person well, or we don't like the person, or the person is younger than us.

Respect them because of their duties and their labor on our behalf.

Hebrews 13:7 Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

I Thessalonians 5:12-13 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.

Article 31: "Be at peace with them without grumbling, quarreling, or fighting."

Ephesians 4:2-3 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.