

NOTES on the CHURCH ORDER

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Introductory Note

The following material is not intended to be an exhaustive commentary on the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Nor is it intended to be a detailed study of “Kybernetics,” the principles of church government. Its purpose is far more modest. It is intended to be a brief summation of the central principles of each article of the Church Order, to be used by the students in preparation for classroom work and lectures. Other commentaries on the Church Order are readily available to the student and can be used with these notes for more detailed discussion of the Church Order proper. The best in the English language is *The Church Order Commentary* by VanDellen and Monsma. After this volume was published, the Christian Reformed Church has revised extensively its Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church, substantially identical with our own. Other works will be mentioned in the following notes.

While the notes in this volume deal with an explanation of the body of the Church Order, brief discussions will be included of various principles underlying the articles. Strictly speaking, these principles belong to the special science of “Kybernetics,” but are included here in the explanation of the articles inasmuch as this is the form in which the material will be presented in the classroom.

The footnotes to be found in the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches at the bottom of various articles are decisions taken by the ecclesiastical assemblies of our churches pertaining to the articles to which they are appended. The following notes will include some discussion of these footnotes. The student is urged to consult the printed Acts to learn more concerning these decisions — especially their history.

The Name of the Discipline

The name assigned to this discipline prior to the Reformation was “Canon Right” or “Canon Law.” As a distinct science, this subject had its origin in the twelfth century with the Pope Gratian. He gathered all the ecclesiastical legislation of councils and papal decretals together into a

systematic and organized body of canon law. Pope John XXII, in the fourteenth century, revised and re-edited the material and brought it up to date. The University of Bologna became the center of the study of canon law and was, for many years, the keeper of the Romish archives. As the papacy extended its authority over the civil realm, civil law was added to canon law.

The name has not been used in Protestant circles. The objections against it are:

- 1) It is too broad a term, especially because it includes civil legislation.
- 2) It has the obnoxious connotations of Romish hierarchy.
- 3) Dr. A. Kuyper later used the term to designate the science of the study of Scripture, for the word "canon" is used to define Scripture as the rule of faith and life.

After the Reformation, various other names came into use. Kilner used the name "Framework of the Church." "Church Government" is a name commonly in use. Some holding to the Presbyterian form of church government called the science "Presbyterianism." Rev. Ophoff, in his notes on church polity, prefers the name "Church Right." The word "right" in the name means both "authority" and "the objective norm of right and wrong."

The most commonly used name, however, is "Church Polity." This is the name we shall be using. The name was first used by Wilhelmus Zepperus, who called this science *Politiae Ecclesiae*. He was the first Protestant theologian to make a special study of church government. Voetius used the name in a slightly altered form: *Politica Ecclesiastica*. The name was used by such men as Richard Hoover, William Cunningham, Charles Hodge, George Lamb, and others.

The name comes from the Latin *politia*. This word means: a) Pertaining to the state or commonwealth; b) Administration of civil affairs; c) Citizenship with its rights, privileges, and obligations. The word, in both the Latin and the Greek, was applied also to the church. It refers to the church from the viewpoint of her institutional life. Hence church polity is the science of church government.

There are two sub-branches to this science. There is first of all "kybernetics," derived from the Greek word $\kappa\upsilon\beta\epsilon\rho\tau\iota\kappa\acute{\alpha}$ and meaning "to rule." This branch deals specifically with the principles of church government. The other branch deals with the rules and regulations according to which the church lives in her institutional life. It is this branch which properly is called "Church Polity."

Different Forms of Church Government

1. The Congregational form of church government

This form of church government is sometimes also called Independentism. Its fundamental principle is that the local congregation is completely independent from other churches. In government it is strictly democratic, all the male members having the right to vote, with no power of veto in the clergy. This vote of the members admits and dismisses members and passes censure. The permanent officebearers are the pastors and deacons. Local churches stand in very loose relation to other congregations, with no broader gatherings except to decide matters of general welfare. The decisions of these gatherings are only declarative.

2. Erastianism

Although there is some doubt about the origin of this view, it is named after Erastus. Thomas Erastus was born at Baden, Switzerland in 1524 and studied theology and medicine at Basil, Pavia, and Bologna. In 1560 and again in 1564 he attended the conferences of Lutheran and Reformed theologians at which was discussed the problems of the Lord's Supper. Erastus considered the policy of cutting off members from the Protestant churches an unwise one. He maintained that the exercise was not proper, but that offenders should be punished with civil penalties by the temporal magistrates.

From these views developed the system of Erastianism, which regards the church as a society which owes its existence and form to laws enacted by the civil magistrates. The civil magistrates alone have authority in all matters of doctrine and discipline within the church. These magistrates govern, excommunicate, and rule in the church, although the actual execution of the state's decisions is left to officers in the church.

3. The Romish system

The Romish system is closely tied to Roman Catholic theology. The visible church needs a visible sacrifice. The sacrifice needs a priest. The priest needs divine consecration to office. He receives this internal consecration from God through the external consecration of the church. Thus ecclesiastical ordination originates with Christ and is continued in uninterrupted succession from the apostles through the bishops. The pope is the chief of the bishops, with jurisdiction over all. He is an absolute monarch, an infallible voice of Christ. The laity have no voice in church government at all.

4. The Episcopalian system

This system is closely related to the hierarchical system of Roman Catholicism. There are three orders of officebearers in the church: bishops, priests, and deacons. The superior order is in the succession of the apostles, with the rights of ordination and jurisdiction. These superior officebearers are called *Episcopoi* and are overseers of all members of the church and the lower clergy. The bishops are the ruling body.

5. The Reformed system

We shall give here only the main features, for other principles will be discussed in connection with our explanation of the articles of the Church Order.

The chief principle of the Reformed system of church government is the autonomy of the local congregation. The local congregation is, in itself, a complete manifestation of the body of Christ. Within this local congregation is the office of believers first of all, who have the anointing of Christ and who function as prophets, priests, and kings in God's church. Secondly, within that congregation are the special offices of ministers, elders, and deacons. These latter are called by Christ through the church to their offices; and it is through them that Christ rules His church. These special offices stand in unique relation to the office of believ-

ers. While we shall return to this point, it is important to notice now that while Christ rules the congregation through the special offices in the church, the office of believers comes to expression in that the believers take part in all the affairs of the church.

These autonomous congregations unite together into a federation of churches. This federation of churches is not something optional for the local congregation; the local congregation is obligated to belong to such a federation by the solemn injunction of Christ to express the unity of the body of Christ in the institutional form of the church. The saints together are called to express their unity of a common life. They are called to stand together in the battle of faith. They are called to express that unity in a common confession. They are called to labor together in the works of the kingdom.

Within this federation of churches, each congregation remains autonomous. Individual differences must be submerged to make the unity a reality. And the broader assemblies have powers, clearly defined by the Church Order, which must be exercised. But these powers are given to the broader assemblies by the local congregations. And the local congregations alone may perform the true work of the church: the preaching of the gospel, the administration of the sacraments, the exercise of Christian discipline.

It is the Reformed system of church polity which is founded upon Scripture and to which we are committed.

The Authority of the Church Order

There is a “historical-comparative” view of church government which denies that the establishment of churches by the apostles with their rules and regulations has normative and authoritative value for the church today. The position of those who maintain this view is that the form the institute of the church takes in any given time, and the rules governing her institutional life, must be determined by the circumstances unique to her age. Consequently, there is nothing definitive in Scripture concerning this subject, and the church order of a denomination may and ought to vary.

We proceed from the basis, first of all, that Scripture is authoritative in all its parts and is the rule of faith and life. While this is certainly true for the individual child of God, it is equally true for the church in her institutional form. The establishment of the churches in the apostolic era and the rules laid down governing their institutional life were rules having normative value. This part of Scripture is also the revelation of the will of God for His church. It is essential to maintain this, for the alternative is a complete destruction of church polity.

The authority of the Church Order is the same as the authority of any creed. That is, in the first place, the authority of the Church Order is derived from Scripture. It has binding authority because it expresses what the church believes to be the Word of God. Its authority is found in the fact that it expresses the truth of Scripture. And that authority is binding as long as it is not shown to be in conflict with Scripture. Nevertheless, because it has no authority of its own, its principles must constantly be subjected to the scrutiny of the Word of God and tested by Scripture. But as long as they are not changed, they must be observed.

Nor can a change be effected in them by an individual member or even by an individual congregation. The Church Order can be changed only by the entire federation of churches; and, ide-

ally, inasmuch as the Church Order is the common possession of the entire Reformed church world, only by the whole Reformed church acting in concert.

We must, however, make a distinction in the kind of articles found in the Church Order. Some articles are based directly upon principles of church government taken from Scripture. Others are indirectly deduced from scriptural teachings. And yet others are made with a view to circumstances in which the church finds herself at a certain given time. While the first two express the basic ideas of Reformed church polity, the last are concerned, not with principle matters, but with the practical life of the church. These articles are formulated by the church using the sanctified wisdom given her of Christ. They can be changed as the needs of the church dictate. These articles concern themselves with such things as the number of classical meetings per year, etc.

The History of the Church Order

John Calvin began the work of enunciating the principles of Reformed church polity in his reformation in Geneva. Many of these principles are to be found in his monumental and continuously influential *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. These principles were put into practical use in the new Church Order which was prepared for the church in Geneva. They were taught in the University of Geneva, where students from all over Europe learned them and carried them into the lands where the Calvin reformation had spread. Such men as Beza, à Lasco, John Knox, Andrew Melville, and Olevianus carried the Reformed and Presbyterian system of church government into the far corners of Europe.

If we turn now to the Netherlands, where our own Church Order has its origin, we find that here, too, men developed the Reformed system of church government under the influence of Calvin. Such men as Acronius, Walaeus, Trigland, and Voetius were leaders in this field.

The Church Order did not arise mechanically in the churches — the churches coming together and, in an abstract manner, formulating the principles which are embodied in our Church Order. Rather, the rules which we now possess arose organically out of the life of the churches. The organization of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands is to a considerable extent the work of John à Lasco. He assisted in the organization of the Dutch church of the refugees from London and laid down the main lines of church polity and liturgy in his *Forma ac Ratio*. Soon after Calvinism came to the Lowlands, in the middle of the sixteenth century, the first steps were taken towards the organization of Reformed congregations. The churches under the cross in the Southern lowlands repeatedly assembled in ecclesiastical gatherings from 1563 on. There were no fewer than ten synods held in the years 1563-1566. Here the problems of the new church were discussed and the rules stipulated by which this church would be governed. Directions were taken from the Church Orders of Geneva and France but adapted to the peculiar circumstances of the churches in the Netherlands.

Further organization was soon necessary. Many refugees from the fierce persecutions in Spain and France were flooding the Lowlands, and the need for a strong national church federation grew. It was in 1568 that a number of refugees came together at Wezel in the autumn of that year to confer together in the interests of the Dutch church. At this meeting were such men as Datheen, Marnix, and Willera van Zuylen. The meeting was not strictly a synod, because the men were not delegated by churches. But general ordinances for the ecclesiastical life of the

churches were drawn up which might be adopted in more peaceable times in a legal assembly. The hope and prayer of these men was that the persecution which then raged would give way to a period of peace, when a synod could be convened to organize more fully the life of the church.

The first synod was held at Emden (across the border) in 1571. This synod adopted Article 84 first of all, deeply conscious of the horror of Romish hierarchy and determined to avoid it at all costs. This synod clearly guided the church along the principles which later came to full expression in our Church Order. They maintained that it belonged to the life and order of each individual congregation to regulate its own matters. But they were also conscious of the common heritage and life of the churches as a whole. And they wanted a Church Order which was based on God's Word, which was a common confession recognized by all the churches, and which preserved the autonomy of each congregation.

While the regulations adopted at Emden remained in force, other synods met which made additions and revisions.

The following is a list of the important synods:

- 1) Dordrecht — 1574 & 1578
- 2) Middelburg — 1581
- 3) Den Haag — 1586
- 4) Dordrecht — 1618-1619. This synod adopted the Church Order which is substantially the one we have today.

The greatest difficulty arose in the Netherlands over the question of the state church. The fact that the Reformed Church in the Netherlands was a state church arose out of the peculiar history of the Reformation in that country. But the churches often conceded too much authority to the civil government and leaned too much on the government for support. This continued after the Synod of Dordrecht and led to all sorts of trouble. While in various provincial synods the Church Order was maintained, nevertheless the end of a long and bitter struggle was that the Church Order was discarded in 1816 and replaced by a collegialistic set of ecclesiastical regulations.

The Afscheiding in 1834 was a return to the Church Order of Dordrecht. This came about only after considerable struggle and suffering. Again in 1886 a group of people under the leadership of Dr. A. Kuyper, known as the *Doleantie*, left the state church to return to the old Church Order. These two groups of churches were brought together into one denomination in 1892 under the Church Order of Dordrecht. This situation continues till the present.

Since that time various revisions have been made in the Church Order. This was done in the Netherlands in 1905 at Utrecht and in this country in 1914. But these changes were not essential. Recently the Gereformeerde Kerken made an extensive revision of the Church Order which is quite different from the original; and the Christian Reformed Church has done the same after more than twelve years of study.

We include here a list of fathers who contributed substantially to the development and understanding of Reformed Church polity.

- 1) Gysbertus Voetius. He wrote *Politica Ecclesiastica*, which appeared in the years 1663-1676. This work is generally recognized as the giant in the development of the basic

principles of Reformed church polity. It is almost impossible to obtain, both in its abridged and unabridged editions.

- 2) Dr. J.J. Pruis. His *Het Kerkrecht de Ned. Hervormde Kerk* was published in Leiden in 1870.
- 3) Dr. G.J. Vos. *De Tegenwoordige Inrichting der Vanderlandsche Kerk* was published in Dordrecht in 1884, and *Hoe Men Zich in de Ned. Hervormde Kerk moet Gedragen* was published in Utrecht in 1896.
- 4) Dr. J.E. Slotemaker de Bruine. He wrote *Nederlandsch Hervormd Kerkrecht* in 1924.
- 5) Dr. A. Kuyper. He wrote *Tractaat van de Reformatie der Kerken* in 1883.
- 6) Prof. Dr. F.L. Rutgers. He worked from 1880 to 1910 in this field and is recognized as an authority. He wrote many works on the subject, including:
 - a) *De Rechtsbevoegdheid Onzer Plaatselijke Kerken*. This was co-authored with Mr. A.F. de Savornin Lobman.
 - b) *Het Kerkverband*. 1882.
 - c) *Acta van de Nederlandsche Synoden der Zestiende Eeuw*. 1889.
 - d) *De Geldigheid van de Oude Kerkenordeningen der Nederlandsche Gereformeerde Kerken*. 1890.
 - e) *He Kerkrecht in Zoover her de Kerk met her Recht in Verband Brengt*. 1894.
 - f) *De Beteekenis van de Gemeenteleden als Zoodanig, Volgens de beginselen, die Calvin heeft Ontwikkeld en Toegepast....* 1906.
 - g) Advice to various consistories and persons in regard to concrete cases in his *Kerkelijke Adviezen*.
- 7) Prof. H.H. Kuyper. His writings appeared particularly in *De Heraut*. Two of his books are *De Opleiding tot den Dienst des Woords bij de Gereformeerden* and *De Verkiezing tot het Ambt*.
- 8) Dr. H. Bouwman. His books include *Het Ambt Der Diakenen* (1907), *De Kerkelijke Tucht naar het Gereformeerde Kerkrecht* (1912), and *Gereformeerd Kerkrecht*, published in two volumes in 1928.
- 9) Joh. Jansen. His works are *De Kerkenordening van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (1917), *De Kerkelijke Tucht* (1915) and *Korte Verklaring van de Kerkenordening* (1925).
- 10) Various works on church polity appeared in connection with the Schilder controversy in the Netherlands in the 1940s concerning particularly the meaning of Article 51.
- 11) Monsma and VanDellen. Their *Church Order Commentary* has become somewhat of a classic in this country.
- 12) J. Schaver. *The Polity of the Churches*, in two volumes.

- 13) H. Hoeksema. Various writings in the *Standard Bearer* and in *The History of the Protestant Reformed Churches*. These writings deal chiefly with the church political aspects of the controversy in 1924.
- 14) G.M. Ophoff. Writings in the *Standard Bearer* and in class notes.

THE CHURCH ORDER PROPER

ARTICLE 1

For the maintenance of good order in the church of Christ it is necessary that there should be: offices, assemblies, supervision of doctrine, sacraments and ceremonies, and Christian discipline; of which matters the following articles treat in due order.

This article is an introductory article, introducing the entire Church Order and setting forth the main content and divisions of the Church Order. It presupposes that good order is necessary in the church of Christ; it defines what is necessary to maintain good order; it sets forth requirements for good order; it gives, therefore, the purpose for which the Church Order is written.

The purpose of the Church Order is the maintenance of good order in the church of Jesus Christ. The presupposition is that God is a God of order. He does nothing haphazardly or arbitrarily, but works always in an orderly fashion because all He does is adapted to a very high purpose. Because the church is God's handiwork (cf. Eph. 2:10), the church must reflect that good order (I Cor. 14:40).

The article speaks of the "church of Christ." These words refer to the manifestation of the church in the world, i.e., the church as institute. The reference is not necessarily to a particular congregation, nor even a particular denomination. Rather, the reference is to the organic body of Christ wherever it comes to manifestation in the world in institutional form. Thus it refers to particular denominations and congregations which accept this Church Order.

All this implies that the Church Order must be based upon the Word of God. The church must walk in the way of God's will, which is revealed to the church. This revelation is contained in the Scriptures. Yet the Scriptures are not a law-book for the church, in which every rule and regulation is spelled out. But the principles are to be found in God's Word. And the church, under the guidance of the Spirit, discovers these principles and applies them specifically to her calling. This must be maintained over against the so-called inner light churches, which were strong at the time the Church Order was written, and over against the total disregard for the authority of Scripture (or any kind of authority) manifested in our own day.

This article lists the four main divisions of the Church Order.

- 1) Offices in the church. This subject is treated in Articles 2-28.
- 2) Assemblies. Treated in Articles 29-52.

- 3) Public Worship. Treated in Articles 53-70.
- 4) Christian discipline. Treated in Articles 71-86.

These four divisions are also the four requirements necessary to maintain good order in the church.

The offices referred to are the offices instituted by Christ. The Dutch has *diensten*, which emphasizes the idea of “service” or “ministering.”

The assemblies are the ecclesiastical assemblies, including Consistories, Classes, Provincial Synods, and General Synods.

The supervision of public worship is also essential to good order in the church. For it is only in this way that purity of doctrine and of the sacraments is maintained.

Christian discipline deals with the discipline of church members, including censure and excommunication and the discipline of officebearers, including suspension and deposition from office.

Of the Offices

ARTICLE 2

The offices are of three kinds: of the ministers of the Word, of the elders, and of the deacons.

While with this article the Church Order begins a discussion of offices in the church, Article 2 is really an introductory article. It is important to notice that the whole subject of offices is treated first, even before a treatment of ecclesiastical assemblies. This emphasizes the fact that the government of the church resides fundamentally in the office. It is in the idea of the office, especially that of elder, that our church government has its chief characteristic.

The main idea of the office is that Christ is the Head and King of His church and that He Himself rules over His church by His Word and Spirit. He is the chief and only Office Bearer (cf. Matt. 28:18; I Cor. 15:27; Eph. 1:20-22; etc.). No man, church, or group of churches may subject themselves to any other yoke than the yoke of Christ. Christ’s word is law within the church. This position of authority which Christ occupies is His because of His work on behalf of His people given to Him from all eternity. He shed His blood for His saints, died for them, earned for them the full salvation of God. He is their Head, who, through His Word and Spirit, now works to make this full salvation their possession. As such He is the “Shepherd and Bishop of your souls” (I Pet. 2: 25).

Christ exercises His authority in the church through men. He does this because His church is here upon earth and He is at God’s right hand in heaven. First of all, Christ causes His people to share in His anointing and establishes in the church the office of believers (cf. Lord’s Day XII). But institutionally, this same office of believers is manifested and comes to expression in the particular offices in the church. But the authority of these special offices in the church is derived from Christ; not from the congregation.

There were, in the early church, the extraordinary offices of apostle and prophet. These offices were limited to the period of direct revelation and became unnecessary with the closing of the Canon of Scripture.

The regular offices in the church include the offices of minister, elder, and deacon. The authority of these offices differs. The prophetic office, which has the authority to teach, is to be found in the office of minister. The royal office, with its authority to rule, is found in the office of elder. And the priestly office, with its authority to dispense the mercy of Christ, is found in the office of deacon.

The original article, changed in 2000, spoke of four offices. This point of the article was incorporated under the influence of Calvin's exegesis of Ephesians 4:11. But usually the office of professor of theology is considered to be a part of the office of the ministry. And this is undoubtedly correct. Hence there are three offices established by Christ in the church, reflecting the threefold office of Christ. The implication of this position is that the training of students for the ministry is the work of the church institute. Our churches have followed this and have placed the Seminary under the control and direction of the church. This is the clear teaching of II Timothy 2:1, 2. Hence, a teacher in the Seminary must be an ordained minister of the gospel (cf. Art. 5 of the Constitution of the Theological School).

ARTICLE 3

No one, though he be a professor of theology, elder, or deacon, shall be permitted to enter upon the ministry of the Word and the sacraments without having been lawfully called thereunto. And when anyone acts contrary thereto, and after being frequently admonished does not desist, the classis shall judge whether he is to be declared a schismatic or is to be punished in some other way.

While Articles 3 and 4 both speak of the calling of ministers who have not previously been in office, Article 3 speaks of the necessity of being lawfully called to this office.

The article is very old, dealing with a problem which appeared early in the Reformed churches. Soon after the Reformation came to the Low Countries, many Roman Catholic clergy left the Romish Church and became itinerant priests and monks. They often intruded upon the office of the ministry without being called. With fluent speech and pious manner they gained a following and made a place for themselves in some congregation. Even consistories would often permit them to function.

Already in 1563 the churches of Flanders dealt with this problem and decided "that none shall be permitted to administer the Word of God without a lawful call, and such as boldly intrude themselves shall be punished." Five years later, in 1568, the Weselian Convention decided that none should be admitted to the ministry "without lawful calling, election, approbation, proper examination, and observance of that lawful order." Subsequent synods (Emden, 1571; Dordrecht, 1574; Dordrecht, 1578) took additional action against officeless men. The article as we now have it was adopted in Middelburg in 1581.

While the idea of the lawful call is discussed in detail in Article 4, it is evident that the article speaks here of an objective call to the ministry. It is necessary to maintain the objective call to

preserve decency and order in the church and to avoid all dangers of subjectivism. It is not merely a question of ability or learning (note the reference to a professor of theology) which fits one for the office. It is rather a question of authority and the right to preach. This authority can be given by Christ alone. Christ must call. But this calling of Christ does not come subjectively by means of some inner voice. It comes objectively through Christ's own church. It is this objective call which clothes one with authority to work in the office of minister and to preach in Christ's name and authority.

This is clearly the teaching of Scripture. The necessity of the lawful call is found in such Scripture passages as Romans 10:14, 15; Matthew 28:19; Ephesians 4:11, 12; Matthew 9:38; Acts 20:28; Hebrews 5:4. There are also examples in Scripture of this lawful calling coming through the church (cf., e.g., Acts 13:1-4; I Tim. 4:14; Tit. 1:5).

The article makes a point of insisting that one must be called to the specific office of minister, even though he functions in another office. This is because each office in the church is separate. This does not imply that there is difference in rank between officebearers. But it does emphasize that there is difference of kind and function.

The article defines the method of treating violators of this principle. They must be declared schismatic publicly in the churches. Or some milder form of discipline may be administered. The classis is to judge in the matter. However, this does not alter the principle that the consistory must admonish and perform the actual work of discipline.

ARTICLE 4

The lawful calling of those who have not been previously in office consists:

First, in the ELECTION by the consistory and the deacons, after preceding prayers, with due observance of the regulations established by the consistory for this purpose, and of the ecclesiastical ordinance that only those can for the first time be called to the ministry of the Word who have been declared eligible by the churches according to the rule in this matter; and furthermore with the advice of classis or of the counselor appointed for this purpose by the classis.

Secondly, in the EXAMINATION both of doctrine and life, which shall be conducted by the classis to which the call must be submitted for approval, and which shall take place in the presence of three delegates of synod from the nearest classis.

Thirdly, in the APPROBATION by the members of the calling church, when, the name of the minister having been announced for two successive Sundays, no lawful objection arises; which approbation, however, is not required in case the election takes place with the cooperation of the congregation by choosing out of a nomination previously made.

Finally, in the public ORDINATION in the presence of the congregation, which shall take place with appropriate stipulations and interrogations, admonitions and prayers, and imposition of hands by the officiating minister (and by other ministers who are present) agreeably to the form for that purpose.

Decisions pertaining to Article 4

A. The election of a minister of the Word shall be conducted in the following manner:

1. The consistory shall make a nomination consisting usually of a trio of eligible ministers or candidates.
 2. The nomination shall be submitted to the approbation of the congregation and unto that end publicly announced to her on two successive Sundays.
 3. From the nomination the male members assembled on a congregational meeting which has been announced on two successive Sundays shall elect by secret ballot. The majority of votes cast shall be decisive. No members under censure nor adult baptized members have the right to vote. Blank votes must be subtracted from the total votes cast in order to determine how many votes a candidate must receive to have the majority which is required to his election.
- B. Advice to classis and counselor. The following usage obtains:
1. That a counselor shall be designated for a vacant congregation to serve her with advice in case of difficulty, and to represent the classis in the process of the election.
 2. That the nomination made by the consistory be submitted to the counselor for approval, who must see to it that the nomination does not conflict with the ecclesiastical regulations pertaining thereto. Further, that without this approbation being obtained the election cannot proceed.
 3. That the congregational meeting upon which the election takes place shall be presided over, if at all possible, by the counselor. Likewise, the calling issued by the consistory, the composition of the call-letter, and the signing thereof by all the consistory members shall be under his supervision.
 4. That also the counselor himself shall sign the call-letter as token of his approbation in name of the classis.
- C. Peremptoir examination of candidates:
1. Examination shall be conducted in:
 - a. Dogmatics.
 - b. Practical qualifications, among which the following:
 - 1) Personal spirituality.
 - 2) Motives for seeking the office of minister.
 - 3) Evidence of insight into pastoral practical labors.
 - c. Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures, treating specifically of:
 - 1) The nature of Holy Scripture.
 - 2) The contents of Holy Scripture.
 - d. Knowledge of the confessions:
 - 1) Meaning and purpose of the confessions.
 - 2) The contents of the confessions.
 - 3) The application of the confessions to our life.
 - e. Controversy.
 - f. Specimen of preaching:
 - 1) Preaching before the congregation in the presence of classis.
 - 2) Critical discussion of the sermon preached.
 2. Further usage prevailing is as follows:
 - a. Voting by secret ballot regarding his admittance.
 - b. In case of a favorable outcome the applicant shall sign the formula of subscription.
 - c. Finally, that he be provided with written proof signed by president and clerk, wherein classis declares that it judges him qualified for the ministry of the Word.
- D. Candidates:
1. To the final theological school examination there has been added a praeparatoir examination, which is conducted by the synod.
 2. Candidates may not be called within one month after this praeparatoir examination.
 3. For the consideration of calls received, the candidate is allowed the time of six weeks.
 4. In case the candidate should not give satisfaction in the peremptoir examination, and the congregation nevertheless continues to desire him, he shall at the following classis be given opportunity for reexamination in those branches in which he appeared unsatisfactorily.

(Adopted by Classis of June 6, 7, 1934; Synod of 1944, Arts. 66, 67.)

The lawful calling of those not previously in office is carefully defined by the Church Order. The reference is once again to the objective call of the church. This is not intended to deny the fact that there is also an internal call. In brief, the internal call consists in a subjective love for the ministry and desire to preach the gospel. It includes the awareness of the ministry as a way of self-denial and a willingness to walk that way. There must be present a certain amount of natural ability. And the Lord must open the way for the long years of study and preparation necessary to enter upon that office. This internal call is necessary to set a man on the course that leads eventually to the ministry and to give him the assurance that he is called.

But the external call is essential to the calling, and without it the internal call means nothing. The external call is the objective call of Christ Himself. It is this call which gives to one the right to preach the gospel in Christ's name. It is only when this call places one in the office that his preaching will be the means of grace — the power of God unto salvation.

The lawful calling consists of four elements.

1) There is first of all "election." Various methods of election have been tried in the past. The article proposes a different method from the method in use in our churches outlined in "A" of the footnote. The article speaks of election by the consistory and the deacons. The footnote proposes a method according to which the consistory nominates and the congregation chooses from the nomination. The method which we follow is preferable. On the one hand, it maintains the very important element, emphasized by the article, of the final authority of the consistory. This authority is retained and its rule in matters of election preserved when the consistory controls the nomination. This is scripturally necessary (cf. Acts 6:5; Acts 14:25; I Tim. 5:22; Tit. 1:5). But, on the other hand, it recognizes that the office of believers is also important. The church is not a spiritual minor, but has come to majority. While the office of believers is expressed through the special offices, this office of believers functions directly in the election of a minister of the Word. This, too, has scriptural basis (cf. Acts 1:25; Acts 6:1-6; II Cor. 8:19).

This election must be according to the regulations adopted by the consistory. These regulations are the rules of order governing elections, which have no direct scriptural basis, but which are adopted by the consistory so that elections are conducted decently and in good order. They may be varied from time to time if necessary. These rules, adopted in part by our churches as a whole, are found under "A" of the footnote.

The article also speaks of the "ecclesiastical ordinance" that only those may be called "who have been declared eligible by the churches, according to the rule in this matter; and furthermore with the advice of classis or of the counselor appointed for this purpose by the classis." The article includes this provision because within a federation of churches, a minister, in a certain sense (cf. following articles), belongs to the denomination as a whole. He does not hold his office in the denomination at large, but he does preach throughout the churches. Hence, the classis has a voice in the matter. The rules governing this aspect of the election are found under "B" of the footnote.

The election must be after preceding prayers. Originally this article read: "after prayers and fasting." The reason was that it was very difficult to find a minister qualified for the office when there was no approval of candidates by synod or classis. Later a prayer service

was considered sufficient, and the requirement of fasting was dropped. We have interpreted this to mean prayers prior to the meeting.

2) Secondly, the lawful calling consists in “examination.” Examination is a part of the “lawful call” because it becomes an indication of the qualifications of a minister, without which he cannot enter upon the ministry of the Word. In our system, examination by the classis follows approbation and does not precede it as proposed by the Church Order. We also have a praeparatoir examination, conducted by the synod (cf. “D” of the footnote). This is intended to determine whether a man is sufficiently prepared, particularly with respect to knowledge, for the ministry in the churches.

The peremptoir, or “decisive,” examination is conducted by the classis. This must be held at a classical session because a minister serves within the churches at large and they all must have a voice in the matter. The synodical delegates must be present to represent the other classis or classes. They must also give their approval, without which ordination cannot proceed.

3) Thirdly, the lawful call includes “approbation.” In our system, approbation is observed by means of nomination and election. It has not the emphasis as in the system proposed by the Church Order. It is nevertheless necessary because the lawful call includes participation by the congregation. They must have a voice in the matter. It is through the whole church that Christ calls His servants. In this way hierarchy is also avoided.

It is in this connection that the footnote under “B” makes provision for a counselor representing the classis. He presides at the time of election to see to it that the proper rules are observed.

4) Finally, the lawful call includes “ordination.” This ordination must take place according to the Form adopted by the churches for this purpose. In this way all the churches have a uniform practice, and this confession must be used in the congregation in order that the people of God may be instructed in the truth and implications of the office of the ministry of the Word.

Ordination takes place with the laying on of hands. This signifies not some mystical and extraordinary grant of the Holy Spirit, but rather the gift of the Spirit of Christ to qualify and ordain to serve as a minister of Christ. Such an ordained man is lawfully called and, hence, invested with the authority to preach. This ceremony need not be repeated, because a minister is called to the office for life (cf. Art. 12).

ARTICLE 5

Ministers already in the ministry of the Word, who are called to another congregation, shall likewise be called in the aforesaid manner by the consistory and the deacons, with observance of the regulations made for the purpose by the consistory and of the general ecclesiastical ordinances for the eligibility of those who have served outside of the Protestant Reformed Churches and for the repeated calling of the same minister during the same vacancy; further, with the advice of the classis or of the counselor appointed by the classis, and with the approval of the classis or of the delegates appointed by the classis, to whom the ministers

called show good ecclesiastical testimonials of doctrine and life, with the approval of the members of the calling congregation, as stated in Article 4; whereupon the minister called shall be installed with appropriate stipulations and prayers agreeably to the form for this purpose.

Decisions pertaining to Article 5

- A. Consistories of vacant churches shall not place on nomination names of such ministers who have not yet served their present congregation two years, unless there be preponderant considerations; and a counselor who deems it his calling to approve in the name of classis such a nomination shall be required to give an account of his reasons to classis.
- B. A minister shall not be called more than once within a year by the same vacant church without advice of classis.
- C. In case of difference of opinion between a counselor and a consistory regarding the legality of a call, the consistory shall not proceed without the consent of classis.
- D. When a minister shall accept a call to another congregation before he has served his present congregation two full years, the congregation to which he moves shall repay one-half of the moving expenses incurred at the time of securing him by the congregation he is vacating.
- E. The "Procedure" appended to Article 9 is understood to fulfill the "general ecclesiastical ordinance for the eligibility of those who have served outside of the Protestant Reformed Churches."

(Adopted by Classis of June 6, 7, 1934; Synod of 1944, Arts. 66, 67; Synod of 1993, Art. 36.)

The article deals with the calling of ministers already in office who are called to another congregation. The article presupposes that a call to a given congregation at the time of ordination is not necessarily a permanent calling for a minister. He may go to another congregation.

The lawful calling of a minister already in the ministry is basically the same as the calling defined in Article 4. There are two exceptions. The first is that the examination by the classis is eliminated and replaced by the need for a minister to show "good ecclesiastical testimonials of doctrine and life." These must be approved by the classis or by the classical deputies. The second exception is that ordination is replaced by installation because a minister is ordained to the office for life. But he is installed in different congregations because he holds his office only in connection with the local congregation.

There are many regulations spelled out in the article and in the attached footnote. The regulations made by the Church Order itself include:

- 1) This calling must be done with observance to the regulations made by the consistory.
- 2) Regulations for the calling of ministers from other denominations. Our churches have no specific regulations for this. But a *colloquium doctum* would have to be conducted. There is an indirect reference to this in the Constitution of the Committee for Correspondence (cf. Preamble).

There are also regulations for the repeated calling of the same minister during the same vacancy. The rule is found in B of the footnote. This rule is good because a congregation may set its heart upon one minister and bother him constantly with repeated calls. But further: if God has not called a minister elsewhere at a particular time, it is not likely that this situation will change suddenly.

The calling must take place with the advice of the classis and the counselor (cf. footnote to Art. 4, B).

Good ecclesiastical testimonials are needed. There is an adopted form for this purpose. This is not a mere formality which can be safely ignored. It is an important safeguard within the fellowship of the churches.

There are a few other regulations included in the footnote.

- 1) A minister must, under normal circumstances, remain within the same congregation for at least two years. There are several reasons for this ruling. It prevents a minister who is inclined to move about, perhaps especially in time of trouble, from placing an undue financial burden upon a congregation. But there is also an important principle involved. A minister cannot effectively work in a congregation in a time period of less than two years. This is under normal circumstances. The time element is a matter of discretion, as the footnote recognizes, when it adds: “unless there be preponderant considerations.” A certain climate, for example, may become physically harmful to a minister.
- 2) Differences of opinion between the counselor and the consistory must be settled at classis.
- 3) The minister who does move in less than two years cannot obligate his congregation to pay his full moving costs when he moved into the congregation he is leaving. The congregation to which he is going must pay one-half of the original moving expenses. This is not a principle, but a matter of sanctified wisdom.

ARTICLE 6

No minister shall be at liberty to serve in institutions of mercy or otherwise, unless he be previously admitted in accordance with the preceding articles, and he shall, no less than others, be subject to the Church Order.

The article deals with cases of ministers serving elsewhere than in a local congregation. Our version is slightly different from the Dutch version. The Dutch article makes reference here to ministers who served as court preachers or ministers who privately served nobles, etc. This was very common practice in the Netherlands, but not a problem in our own country. But the article also covers ministers who serve as chaplains in institutions of mercy. The question arises: what is their status?

There are various principles involved in the regulation set forth in Article 6. These principles are closely related to each other.

First of all, the authority of a minister to preach does not reside in himself, but resides in the church of Christ. Hence, and in the second place, no person can hold the office apart from the institute of the church, i.e., the local congregation. It is from this congregation that the calling proceeds, and it is only in connection with this congregation that a man retains his office. It follows therefore, in the third place, that a minister who labors in some such special calling must be lawfully called according to the regulations of Articles 3 through 5. Further, he must labor only under the authority and supervision of a local congregation. It is in this way that the church preaches through him, that he performs official labors, and that his work is a means of grace.

This does not refer to teaching in a school, even Bible. This would be the case if the schools our children attend were parochial. But they are parental, and the obligation to instruct in them rests not upon the church but upon the parents.

ARTICLE 7

No one shall be called to the ministry of the Word without his being stationed in a particular place, except he be sent to do church extension work.

This article arose out of the problem of itinerant preachers who were not (and sometimes refused to be) connected with a local congregation. Certain decisions were made against this practice as early as 1574. In 1581 the Synod of Middelburg spoke of the necessity of exceptions which would be approved by classis or synod. In 1586 the Synod of 's Gravenhage made provisions for work of this nature to be done among congregations scattered because of persecution, and made provisions for mission work.

Our churches have no problem in this respect. Nevertheless, here, too, several important principles are involved. These principles are the same as those underlying Article 6. There may not be ordination of “ministers at large” by classis or synods. This was an early practice in some provinces of the Netherlands. No minister may labor except under the jurisdiction of a congregation and consistory.

The exception to this is mission work, although this is not an exception to the principles involved but only to the stipulation of the article: “No one shall be called ... except he be stationed in a particular place.”

The article refers to all mission work, including church extension work. The original article read: “Except he be sent to gather churches here and there” (cf. Constitution of the Domestic Mission Committee). But if a minister is called to do mission work he must even then be called according to the provisions of Articles 3-5 and must be sent by the local congregation through its consistory. In this way he is called and sent by Christ and labors under the supervision of authorized officebearers.

ARTICLE 8

Persons who have not pursued the regular course of study in preparation for the ministry of the Word, and have therefore not been declared eligible according to Article 4, shall not be admitted to the ministry unless there is assurance of their exceptional gifts, godliness, humility, modesty, common sense, and discretion, as also gifts of public address. When such persons present themselves for the ministry, the classis (if the synod approve) shall first examine them, and further deal with them as it shall deem edifying, according to the general regulations of the churches.

The Reformed churches have always insisted on a trained ministry. This is to be traced directly back to the Calvin Reformation. Soon after the Reformation was established in Geneva,

Calvin began the Academy, where ministers of the gospel were trained to serve the churches of the Reformation in all parts of Europe. The exception spoken of in this article was allowed only in time of emergency. This was the case in the early history of the Reformed churches in Holland, when as yet there were no institutions of higher learning. At the time following the Synod of Dordrecht, when many ministers were deposed because of their refusal to sign the Canons, this article was again used. The same was true of the days following the “Afscheiding” in 1834 and the “Doleantie” in 1886. Since that time this article has been seldom used.

The principles underlying this article are these. In the first place, while formal education is highly desirable, it is not essential. God may call to the office of the ministry whomever He pleases. Education is not an indispensable prerequisite but a matter of Christian discretion. In the second place, men with exceptional gifts may be endowed with these gifts from the Lord in preparation for the call to the ministry. However, it is important to notice that not the gifts themselves are exceptional, but the measure in which one possesses them.

These gifts are enumerated in the article.

Godliness is essentially the fear of the Lord.

Humility, while a part of godliness, is the grace to forget oneself and set one’s desires exclusively upon the glory of God.

Modesty means, strictly speaking, virtuous in the moral and ethical sense of the Word.

Common sense is very closely related to the Dutch word *verstand*, i.e., the intellectual ability and spiritual wisdom to apply the knowledge of the Word of God to the specific problems of life.

Discretion is the spiritual ability to discern between the truth and the lie, between right and wrong.

Gifts of public address do not refer so much to mere oratorical ability as to the ability to make the truth clear and understandable to the sheep and lambs of God’s flock.

The article does not mean to dispense with all training. It refers only to the regular course of study which the churches as a whole have set up as being, in their opinion, adequate for the preparation for the ministry. Such persons who seek the ministry under this article must have some training and must be examined by the classis. The procedure then is as follows:

- 1) There must be some assurance of these gifts on the part of the individual, who himself must take the initiative.
- 2) He would, under ordinary circumstances, apply through his own consistory for examination by the classis. His own consistory must equally be assured of the presence of these gifts. In case of disagreement, the individual would have the right to go to classis by way of appeal.
- 3) The classis, with the approval of the synod, must then examine such a man to determine for itself whether these gifts mentioned in the article are present.

At this point the article simply speaks of further dealing with such a person “as it shall deem edifying according to the general regulations of the churches.” These regulations would probably include the following steps:

- 1) There would be a certain period of probation, during which time the aspirant receives further instruction and brings a word of edification under the supervision of other ministers in the churches.
 - 2) Another examination would be held similar to the praeparatoir examination.
 - 3) The aspirant would be declared eligible for a call. Having received and accepted a call, he would submit to a peremptoir examination. This would be done by the classis with the synodical delegates present.
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ARTICLE 9

Preachers without fixed charge, or others who have left some sect, shall not be admitted to the ministry of the church until they have been declared eligible, after careful examination by the classis, with the approval of synod.

Decision pertaining to Article 9

Procedure for admission of ministers from other denominations:

- A. A minister from another denomination desiring entrance into the ministry of the Protestant Reformed Churches under Article 9 of the Church Order shall apply to the Protestant Reformed classis nearest to which he resides.
 1. The minister making application shall have publicly resigned his ministry and his membership in his former congregation and denomination and become a member of a local Protestant Reformed Church.
 2. The minister making application shall meet with and seek the advice of a nearby Protestant Reformed consistory.
 - a. The consistory shall interview the minister sufficiently to make recommendations to the classis concerning the applicant's qualifications for the ministry in the Protestant Reformed Churches and to determine whether they would be willing to hold his ministerial credentials until he accepts a call, should classis approve his examination and declare him eligible for a call.
 - b. The advice of the consistory shall be forwarded to the Classical Committee along with the applicant's formal request for entrance into the ministry of the Protestant Reformed Churches.
 3. The minister making application shall furnish the following documentation:
 - a. A declaration of his reasons for desiring entrance into the ministry of the Protestant Reformed Churches and an account of his background in the ministry.
 - b. A testimonial from the consistory or session under which he previously labored concerning his purity of doctrine and sanctity of life. If this is not possible because his leaving makes him a *persona non grata*, the classis shall make investigation of the applicant's previous labors.
 - c. A diploma, or statement of credits, from an accredited college and recognized seminary, to show the scholastic attainment of the applicant.
 - d. A statement of health from a physician.
- B. Classis shall act upon the applicant's request, with the concurring advice of the Synodical Deputies, taking into consideration the following:
 1. All the documents listed under A, 3 above are found to be in good order.
 2. The need for ministers in the Protestant Reformed denomination at the time of the application.
- C. If the applicant's request is approved, classis shall set a date for convening another classis for the purpose of examining the applicant, and shall instruct the Classical Committee to draw up an examination schedule. The examination shall commence with a specimen sermon, which sermon must be approved by classis and the Synodical Deputies before classis shall proceed to the rest of the examination. The examination shall follow the regular adopted schedule for

- the classical examination of candidates for the ministry (cf. Article 4) with two additions: Protestant Reformed distinctives, and Knowledge of the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches. In addition, the applicant must express a willingness to abide by any past decisions of the Protestant Reformed synods concerning doctrine and practice.
- D. After classis approves his examination, with the concurrence of the Synodical Deputies, the classis shall declare the applicant eligible to receive a call into the ministry of the Word and sacraments in the Protestant Reformed Churches, without further need of examination.
 - E. The newly accepted minister shall be required to sign the Formula of Subscription before the meeting of classis adjourns and shall be presented with a classical diploma.
 - F. His eligibility for a call shall be announced to the churches.
 - G. Until the newly approved minister accepts a call, his ministerial credentials shall be held by a Protestant Reformed consistory appointed by classis.
 1. This consistory shall supervise the interim labors of the minister and shall see to the needs of his financial support. Financial assistance may be sought from sister congregations, if this is deemed necessary.
 2. If the minister does not receive a call after three years, he, with the advice of his consistory, shall request Classis to renew his eligibility.
- (Adopted by Synod of 1993, Art. 36; Synod of 1994, Art. 55.)

The original article is slightly different from our present form. It reads: “Novices, priests, monks, and others that have left some sect, shall not be admitted to the service (ministry) of the church except with great carefulness and due consideration, and after they also have first been proved for a time.”

The present form of the article is, regrettably, weaker than the original. For one thing, the loss of the word “novice” is not good. The idea is thoroughly scriptural (cf. I Tim. 3:6) and guards against the danger of admitting someone who seeks the office on the basis of enthusiasm for the cause. Secondly, there should be a period of proving, as the original article required. The office of the ministry is a very high office and should not be easily and quickly filled without careful consideration. While, as churches, we have seldom faced the problem, the office should be diligently protected.

The history of this article is to be traced to the Reformation in the Lowlands. At that time many tried to enter the ministry who had recently come from the Romish church or from some other sect. These included wandering priests, monks, or men who had at one time belonged to the Anabaptist movement. At the time the Reformed churches were established and recognized by the government this article went into effect. When the original article spoke of “novices” it referred to those who had been newly converted to the Reformed faith.

“Preachers without a fixed charge” are ministers who possess no congregation of their own. In our own time an example of such would be ministers who come to this land from the Netherlands. By “others who have left some sect” the article refers to men who have left another church or sect and have joined our church and desire to enter the ministry.

The article stipulates that worthy applicants must surely be admitted, while unworthy applicants must be barred. To determine whether they are worthy, the classis must conduct a *colloquium doctum*, or regular examination. Their ordination into the ministry cannot take place without the approval of synod.

ARTICLE 10

A minister, once lawfully called, may not leave the congregation with which he is connected, to accept a call elsewhere, without the consent of the consistory, together with the deacons, and knowledge on the part of the classis; likewise no other church may receive him until he has presented a proper certificate of dismissal from the church and the classis where he served.

Decisions pertaining to Article 10

- A. When a minister accepts a call he shall ask of the consistory dismissing him to grant him a fitting testimonial bearing witness of faithful service performed, according to Article 5 of the Church Order, and expressing acquiescence in his departure, according to Article 10 of the Church Order. This testimonial shall be sent to the Classical Committee for examination and approval; thereupon it shall be delivered to the counselor who, upon finding it in good order, shall only thereupon proceed with the installation.
- B. A minister who moves to another congregation becomes the charge of that congregation (for salary, etc.) immediately after he has preached his farewell to the congregation he is leaving (unless other arrangements have been made, e.g., for the taking of a vacation).
(Adopted by Classis of June 6, 7, 1934; Synod of 1944, Arts. 66, 67.) (Cf. Ministerial Certificate of Dismissal and Testimonial, pp. 118, 119.)

This article, as well as Articles 3, 4, and 7, was adopted because of evils perpetrated by itinerant and self-appointed preachers. Some of these preachers, after wearying of service in one congregation, would without notice or permission leave in search of “greener pastures.” Their motives were often personal and wholly carnal. It is against this evil that the article was written.

There was a time when this article provided for what were called “conditional calls.” This was especially because of persecution but also because of lack of training for ministers. A minister might be forced to flee from his flock to save his life when persecution broke out in his area. Another congregation, not subjected to persecution would call him conditionally, i.e. with the understanding that, should things improve in his original congregation, he would be free to return. Or again, some ministers were not very well educated. A congregation would call such a minister conditionally, i.e., with the understanding that if he proved incompetent, he could be released. As the situation stabilized, these conditional calls were dropped.

This article has been variously interpreted from time to time. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the article was interpreted in such a way that the power to decide a call rested almost entirely with the consistory. Ministers were sometimes even held in congregations against their own wills. Then again, especially lately, the article has been interpreted in such a way that the minister is almost solely responsible for determining a call. The consent of the consistory is little more than a formality.

The principles are clear.

In the first place, the bond which unites a minister with his congregation is by the appointment of Christ Himself and is a sacred tie. This tie cannot be lightly broken. Both the minister and the consistory must be very sure that Christ Himself has broken it.

Secondly, the office of the ministry is under the supervision of the consistory. They are responsible for the well-being of the congregation. And they must have a voice in the matter.

Thirdly, it is the responsibility of the minister himself to determine before the face of God when his work is finished in one place and when God summons him to labor elsewhere. Hence, the active and decisive part of the decision rests with the minister. But the consistory must exercise an advisory and consenting role.

It might be well to point out in passing that such a call is not determined on the basis of some “inner light” or special sign from God. It is rather to be determined by a prayerful and careful consideration of all the circumstances involved in such a decision. God reveals His will through the objective circumstances both of the congregation a minister is serving and of the congregation which has called him.

The classis must have a voice in the matter since the minister is a part of the classis.

The procedure to be followed in leaving a congregation to take up work elsewhere includes the following steps:

- 1) The minister receives a call.
- 2) The article does not require that he ask for permission from his consistory to consider a call, although this is implied in the necessity of discussing the call with the consistory whose advice he seeks. Strictly speaking, he seeks the consent of the consistory only when he has decided to accept the call. He must inform the consistory of this, together with his grounds. Mutual consultation is implied, and room is left open for appeal if there is disagreement.
- 3) The minister is granted a proper certificate of dismissal by his consistory, which is approved by the classis or the Classical Committee.
- 4) This certificate is sent to the counselor of the congregation whose call he has accepted. The counselor, if everything is in order, makes preparations for installation.
- 5) The minister becomes the responsibility of the new congregation after he has preached his farewell sermon.

ARTICLE 11

On the other hand, the consistory, as representing the congregation, shall also be bound to provide for the proper support of its ministers, and shall not dismiss them from service without the knowledge and approbation of the classis and of the delegates of the synod.

The fact that this article is introduced by the words “On the other hand” indicates that there is a close connection between it and Article 10. The point is that Article 10 speaks of the duty of a minister to his congregation, while this article speaks of the duty of the congregation, through its consistory, to its minister.

The article speaks of the one obligation of financial support and lays down a certain regulation with respect to dismissal from service. The second part of the article clearly implies that the obligation of a congregation is much more than financial. Christ calls a minister through the congregation to labor in that flock. The minister is bound by sacred ties to the congregation call-

ing him. The congregation is solemnly enjoined to receive a minister as a gift of Christ — a gift which must be received with gratitude. Hence the congregation must act towards her minister as a servant of Christ, an obligation mentioned also in the Form for Ordination.

But as far as the financial support of a minister is concerned, this also rests upon the congregation. It has not been at all uncommon for a congregation to abandon her minister and refuse him adequate financial support in an evil effort to get rid of him when they were wearied by him.

There are scriptural grounds for this obligation. In the old dispensation, provision was made for the priests and Levites (cf. Lev. 6:14-18; Num. 18:8-32; Deut. 12:11-19). The same is true of the New Testament, where this obligation is explicitly mentioned (cf. Matt. 10:8-10; I Cor. 9:7-18; II Cor. 11:7-12; Gal. 6:6). The call letter also speaks of and promises proper support and defines this as being sufficient to free a minister from all worldly cares.

There are several rules which are implied in this article. In the first place, it definitely makes the congregation responsible for the support of the minister. Occasionally objections have been raised against this principle and other methods used. Sometimes the support of the minister is left to free will gifts. But these are wrong.

In the second place, the article does not make rules defining the amount of support a minister is to receive. This is not the purpose of the Church Order, nor would this be possible. The Church Order speaks of “proper” support; in each individual case the Church Order cannot determine what this is.

In the third place, neither a classis nor a synod may determine this proper support. This belongs to the province of the consistory. The church visitors of the classis inquire into the matter. They may admonish a consistory and even report back to classis so that classis is given opportunity to advise a consistory if necessary. But beyond this, neither classis nor synod may go.

But in the fourth place, the consistory must provide proper support. Never should it be necessary for a minister to beg for additional money.

Fifthly, the Church Order does not define how this money shall be obtained by the consistory. Various ways have been tried: free-will gifts, pew rentals, budgets, drives, etc. In general, the best way is the most systematic way.

And finally, the minister ought not to labor in a secular vocation. The work of the ministry is a full-time task, and the minister ought not to be distracted from this work by any secular vocation (cf. Art. 12).

While the last part of the article is negative, it speaks of the possibility of dismissal from service. In general, it ought to be noticed that this is to be distinguished from emeritation (spoken of in Article 13) and suspension and deposition (spoken of in Arts. 79 and 80). Emeritation refers to the time when a minister lays aside the active duties of his office because of illness or old age or for some other reason while retaining the office itself. Suspension and deposition is dismissal from the office, in distinction from dismissal from service, of which this article speaks.

There are various reasons why such dismissal may become necessary. Among these reasons are to be found incompatibility between a minister and a congregation, which does not involve sin; trouble in a congregation which makes a minister’s work ineffective; inability or unwillingness on the part of a congregation to support its minister; a particular climate detrimental to the health of a minister, etc.

In case dismissal becomes necessary, the procedure to be followed is:

- 1) The congregation through the consistory relieves the minister of all active duties in the congregation.
- 2) This can be done only with the knowledge and approbation of the classis and the delegates from synod. This stipulation is required in order that an impartial body may judge and because the minister belongs to the churches in common.
- 3) He is granted license to preach in other congregations and is made eligible for a call.
- 4) While he is waiting for a call, he remains a member of the congregation which has dismissed him and holds his office in that congregation. This remains true until he receives a call elsewhere. That congregation also remains responsible for his support. It stands to reason that this can be only a temporary measure. In case he should not, after a definite period of time, receive a call elsewhere, his ministerial status should be terminated and a congregation would no longer be responsible for his support.

ARTICLE 12

Inasmuch as a minister of the Word, once lawfully called as described above, is bound to the service of the church for life, he is not allowed to enter upon a secular vocation except for such weighty reasons as shall receive the approval of the classis.

The article discusses the possibility of a minister leaving his office altogether. It is, therefore, to be distinguished from Article 10, which speaks of the consistory dismissing a minister from service within that congregation although the minister retains his office (cf. Art. 13, which speaks of emeritation).

There is an important principle underlying this article. On the one hand, the Reformed churches did not agree with the Romish position on the matter of the office. The Romish church taught (and teaches) that an officebearer can never be separated from his office, even if he should commit a gross sin. This is a direct conclusion from the position of the Romish church that ordination, or Holy Orders, is a sacrament. Our fathers maintained that it was possible for an officebearer to lose his office.

On the other hand, however, the Reformed churches took the position that a minister, once lawfully called, is bound to the service of the church for life. While it is possible for him to lose his office, under all normal circumstances he retains his office till he dies. There were good reasons for taking this position, even though this principle is not directly taught in Scripture. For one thing, there are many examples in Scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments, of men who functioned in their offices for life. This was true of the prophets, of the apostles, and of such men as Timothy, Titus, James the brother of the Lord, and others. In the second place, this would seem to follow from the fact that the office of the minister demands of him his complete love for the church and the Word of God, his entire devotion to the cause of Christ, his continuous perseverance in the work, and his wholehearted separation to the calling. These things are implied in such passages as John 21:15-17; II Corinthians 5:14; John 9:4; Luke 9:62; I Corin-

ans 9:16, 17; II Timothy 4:1-5, 10; Romans 1:1; Acts 15:26. Besides this, as Rev. Ophoff writes: “It follows from the nature of matters that the teaching ministry is called for life. The office of ministers of the gospel comes only through long and persistent searching of the Scriptures. The Word of God is deep and inexhaustible...” (cf. mimeographed notes on Church Right). From all these considerations we may well conclude that our fathers had a correct understanding of the office of minister when they penned this article.

Nevertheless, the possibility is taken into account that a minister must leave his office to enter on a secular vocation. The word “secular” is not a happy translation. Originally the Dutch reads: “*een andere staat des levens.*” Hence the idea is not simply that the minister enters upon some non-religious kind of work, but that he enters on a different vocation from the ministry. This would surely include such vocations as lawyers, doctors, politicians, factory workers; but it would also include the vocation of Bible teacher, editor of a religious periodical, president or teacher in a Bible college, etc.

To leave the office of ministry for a secular vocation is an exception to the rule. There must be “weighty reasons” for doing so. Such weighty reasons could conceivably be failure to receive a call after dismissal according to Article 11, inability to function in the office during times of persecution, failure of a congregation to support its minister, awareness on the part of a minister of his lack of spiritual qualifications, etc. But such action as this, and the reason why a minister pursues such a course of conduct, must receive the approval of the classis. Originally the article included the words “and the delegates from Synod” after the word “classis.” It would have been well if this were retained.

If a minister would nevertheless resign from office without the approval of his consistory and of the classis, he would become guilty of faithless desertion of office and would become worthy of suspension and deposition according to the provisions of Article 80.

ARTICLE 13

Ministers who by reason of age, sickness, or otherwise are rendered incapable of performing the duties of their office shall nevertheless retain the honor and title of a minister, and the churches which they have served shall provide honorably for them in their need (likewise for the orphans and widows of ministers) out of the common fund of the churches, according to the general ecclesiastical ordinances in this matter.

Decisions pertaining to Article 13

- A. In the case of ministers who through no fault of their own have been deprived of a congregation, it is both possible and mandatory that, pending the reception of a call to another congregation, such ministers be temporarily declared emeriti.

Procedure:

1. The minister who through no fault of his own has been left without a fixed charge may apply to a consistory of the classis in which he resides for emeritation, and such consistory may declare him emeritus.
2. This shall not be done, however, without the approbation of the classis and of the deputies of the synod.

Responsibility for Support:

1. Since the minister becomes emeritus not of his own congregation but of a congregation he has not served, the obligation to support him and to provide honorably for him “in

[his] need” shall not rest upon the local congregation but upon the churches in common, and he is to be supported out of the common Emeritus Fund of the churches.

2. In such cases, if the abandoning church has been subsidized from the Needy Churches Fund, the amount of such subsidy shall be transferred to the Emeritus Fund, pending the next meeting of synod.
- B. If an emeritus minister transfers his membership to another congregation in the denomination, his ministerial credentials are also to be transferred to that congregation. This transfer is to be made in the following manner: The consistory of the church which the emeritus minister served last formally requests the consistory of the church which the emeritus minister wishes to join to exercise supervision over him.
- (Adopted by Synod of 1956, Art. 177, Suppl. XVIII; Synod of 1995, Art. 62, Suppl. XXI.)

This article deals with the emeritation of ministers. The term “emeritus,” while not appearing in this article, has come to be used generally to refer to a minister retired from active service. The term comes from the Latin and means literally “out of merit.” It refers to the fact that a minister has, because of his faithful service to the church, earned the right both to the title and honor of a minister when he retires from active service as well as to the support of the church. This principle has always been maintained by Reformed churches and surely is the implicit teaching of Scripture. A minister does not have the opportunity to provide for his future in his lifetime and is, according to Article 12, bound to the service of the church for life. Hence the churches who support him during his active ministry have the obligation to care for his needs when he can no longer serve the church.

This article teaches two different ideas: the status of ministers emeriti and the support of ministers emeriti.

As far as their status is concerned, the article teaches that a retiring minister retains the honor and title of his office. He retires from his active duties in the congregation which has last called him. The article presupposes, of course, that at his retirement he is a member of the congregation in good standing and has labored faithfully in his calling. Such a minister remains in office even when he does not perform the duties of the office. His legal status is that of minister in the congregation which he has last served. He continues to possess the rights and privileges of a minister: the right and privilege to preach the Word, administer the sacraments, and perform other official functions in the church.

It is possible that, for one reason or another, a minister takes up residence elsewhere and transfers his membership to another congregation. But even should he do this, he retains his office in the congregation he has last served. Preferably, therefore, if circumstances permit, he should also remain in that congregation.

He is always subject to the supervision and discipline of the consistory where he holds his emeritation. In case his conduct warrants such action, this consistory can still suspend and depose him from office. In the event this happens, his status as emeritus minister ceases.

The article mentions two reasons for emeritation: age or sickness. If he retires because of age, his emeritation will be permanent. If he retires because of sickness, it is possible that his emeritation be for a time only.

The article also adds to the reasons for emeritation: “or otherwise.” This refers to emeritation because of inability to labor due to a serious accident, or emeritation to grant time to a min-

ister for further study. It has also been interpreted to include cases where a minister retains his office while he does not actively function in a particular congregation. Two examples of this are professors of theology and ministers deprived of a congregation through no fault of their own.

The procedure to obtain emeritation is described in the “Constitution of the Emeritus Committee.” The Constitution apparently provides for the minister himself to take the initiative in seeking the status of emeritus minister. Under normal circumstances this would be proper procedure. But there are circumstances when a consistory itself would have to take the initiative. This would happen, e.g., when a minister is unable to function in his office but refuses to recognize the fact.

Normally, after a minister requests emeritation, the consistory passes upon the question. If emeritation is granted, this decision is subject to the approval of classis and synod. The matter of emeritation is handled by an Emeritus Committee of the synod. Provisions are made for the care of a minister during the interim between ecclesiastical assemblies.

Secondly, the article discusses the support of such ministers who receive their emeritation.

In general, the article speaks of support “in their need.” It is possible that a minister be emeritus but that he receives no support, as, e.g., professors of theology. Further, this support is not a matter of benevolence but of legal right. This is emphasized by the Constitution, which confer. The article requires that this support be “honorable.” It must not be a grudging or stingy support, but it must be sufficient for a minister to live decently and honorably. This support must also be given to the widows and orphans of ministers.

The article also speaks of the responsibility for support: “The church which they have last served shall provide honorably for them in their need ... out of the common fund of the churches.” The article therefore, teaches that the responsibility of support rests upon the local church, while this support itself comes “out of the common fund of the churches.” The Constitution has interpreted this to mean that the local church is responsible for the support of an emeritus minister and may only draw from the common fund of the churches when it is unable to provide for such support itself. There are reasons why a change in this procedure might be advisable. In the first place, a minister has served all the churches, and one could argue that his support when emeritus should rest upon all the churches. In the second place, a church might be hesitant to call a minister when he nears retirement age because it would be responsible for supporting him. But even if this procedure were changed, the local congregation retains the responsibility, and support must come through this consistory to the minister.

The article adds that this support must be “according to the general ecclesiastical ordinances in this matter.” This refers to the Constitution of the Emeritus Committee and any other rules which may, over the course of the years, be drawn up. For details, confer the Constitution and the footnote added to this article.

ARTICLE 14

If any minister, for the aforesaid or any other reason, is compelled to discontinue his service for a time, which shall not take place without the advice of the consistory, he shall nevertheless at all times be and remain subject to the call of the congregation.

Article 14, which speaks of a leave of absence, continues the general subject of discontinuance of service of a minister. But, in distinction from the other articles, this refers to a *temporary* release from the *duties* of the office.

Once again, this article has its origin in the practice of ministers of the churches of the Reformation to labor here and there and to leave a congregation without following an orderly procedure.

The article does not speak of emeritation or of permanent dismissal from office. It rather speaks of a temporary release from the service of the church during which the minister retains his status: "... is compelled to discontinue his service *for a time*." Thus a definite time is referred to. This may be a stipulated time (which is preferable) or a time the length of which is required by the nature of his absence. The release from the duties of office ceases therefore when the time is expired. The length of time ought to be a matter of definite understanding between a minister and his consistory.

There are various reasons for such a release. The article itself merely says: "for the aforesaid or any other reason." By the word "aforesaid" the article is not speaking of emeritation however; the meaning must be that a minister receives release from a portion of his duties because of old age or release from all his duties on a temporary basis because of illness. But there is added the phrase, "any other reason." It is quite possible that this originally referred to persecution, when a minister was forced to flee. But there may be other reasons. These would include leave of absence for further studies, leave to work on a Bible translation, leave to travel as a delegate to a foreign country, leave to inspect a mission field, etc.

The article uses the strong word "compelled": "If any minister is compelled to discontinue his service..." This ought to be interpreted to mean that a temporary leave from the duties of the congregation would serve the good of the church where the minister labors for the good of the churches as a whole.

The minister's status is that of a legal minister of the Word in the congregation to which he belongs. He remains subject to the call of the congregation. They are responsible for his support. He is responsible to them in his work and is under their discipline and supervision. This is true also as far as his work during his leave is concerned. He must return again to his congregation when his leave expires. It is possible that, during his absence, the congregation calls another minister. In that case he is made eligible for a call after his leave. He may also consider a call during his leave. But all this is by mutual consent. The principle is that the tie between a minister and his congregation remains in force and a minister continues to hold his office in the local church.

The procedure to secure such a release is as follows: The minister seeks the advice of the consistory. This advice must first be granted before a minister can leave. The advice is granted only when the reasons for the leave are satisfactory and conditions in the congregation warrant such a leave. If conditions should warrant a return even before the leave has expired, the minister would be under the obligation to return. If there is disagreement, this must be resolved by classis.

ARTICLE 15

No one shall be permitted, neglecting the ministry of his church or being without a fixed charge, to preach indiscriminately without the consent and authority of synod or classis. Likewise, no one shall be permitted to preach or administer the sacraments in another church without the consent of the consistory of that church.

Decision pertaining to Article 15

In case any one of our candidates has not received a call after three years and still desires that his candidacy remain in effect, he shall address himself to synod, who shall treat his case as may be proper.

(Adopted by Classis of June 6, 7, 1934; Synod of 1944, Arts. 66, 67.)

The evils against which this article is directed are identical with those mentioned in connection with Article 9. In the early history of the Reformed church, Anabaptists, priests who left the Romish church, and even common laymen took it upon themselves to preach. These and others often abandoned congregations where they did preach for a while and went elsewhere. Sometimes they would be accepted by another congregation; sometimes they would simply force themselves on another congregation; sometimes they would organize a new congregation and begin to preach in it. They preached indiscriminately wherever the opportunity presented itself.

Thus this article follows from others. It follows from Article 4 which speaks of the lawful call. It follows from Article 7, which establishes the principle of the need to be stationed in a particular place. It follows from Article 9, which speaks of preachers without a fixed charge. While all these articles refer to the same general evil prevalent in the Reformed churches, it must be remembered that the times when the Reformed churches were formed were sometimes chaotic, both because of persecution and because of the fact that sound principles of church government had not yet been completely developed.

We have mentioned before that the office of a minister resides within a congregation, and a minister can hold this office only within a given congregation. The reasons for this are evident. In the first place, the minister can never possess his office on his own, separated from the church of Christ of which he must be a member. Secondly, the calling to the office is through Christ's church and can be held by a minister only as a part of that church. In the third place, the local congregation is a complete manifestation of the body of Christ. But this is true as the congregation functions through its threefold office of minister, elder, and deacon. Thus, only when the office is held in the local congregation can this manifestation of Christ's body in the institute be complete.

However, this article is based upon another very important principle, closely related to the one defined above. That is the principle of supervision of the preaching. The preaching must be under the supervision of the synod and classis as far as admission into the ministry is concerned. But the more definite supervision of the preaching is the work of the consistory. They must have the oversight of the Word and doctrine. This principle must be maintained. Christ calls to the office by the congregation through the consistory. The authority to preach, therefore, comes from Christ, through the congregation functioning through its consistory. And the supervision of the Word and sacraments, in obedience to Christ, is the work of the consistory alone.

With these principles in mind, we can turn to the article.

In the first place, two kinds of preachers are referred to: those neglecting the ministry of their church, and those without a fixed charge. In the strict sense of the word, these men were not really ministers at all, since a man without a fixed charge cannot hold an office. They were vagabond ministers or self-appointed ministers. But the article can also refer to those who are dismissed from service under the regulations of Article 11. The same principles hold for them.

The evil referred to is preaching indiscriminately. The Dutch spoke of “preaching here and there.” These men would preach wherever they could get an audience. But this indiscriminate preaching refers also to ministers of one congregation preaching in established churches without the consent of the consistory. The setup in the Netherlands is somewhat different from ours in this land. There each consistory had the rule over a certain territory marked by definite territorial boundaries — which boundaries included several congregations. Over these congregations one consistory would have the rule. This article forbids a minister from preaching in another territory without the consent of the consistory. But in this country, where we have no such boundaries, the rule still applies. It has reference to a minister intruding upon another congregation without consistorial consent.

The consent of the synod or classis is mentioned particularly with reference to the general supervision which both these ecclesiastical bodies have over men who are entering the ministry for the first time.

To this article is appended a footnote which deals with candidates who receive no call. Their candidacy expires after three years. If the term of the candidacy is to be extended, the procedure is: the candidate must himself take the initiative in seeking such an extension. Should he fail, his candidacy automatically expires. If he does desire to obtain an extension, he must address this request to synod, with which body the final decision rests.

ARTICLE 16

The office of the minister is to continue in prayer and in the ministry of the Word, to dispense the sacraments, to watch over his brethren, the elders and deacons, as well as the congregation, and finally, with the elders, to exercise church discipline and to see to it that everything is done decently and in good order.

In speaking of the duties of a minister of the gospel, the article uses the expression: “The office of the ministry.” It must be understood that the article is not using the term “office” in this connection in the technical sense of the word as referring specifically to a position of authority under Christ. Rather, the term refers to the task and assignment of the office. But it must not be forgotten that the peculiar task of the office follows from the nature of the office which the minister holds. His work is unique because of the position he occupies in his office.

In general, concerning these duties, the Church Order does not mean to be exhaustive in listing the duties of a minister. There are other duties referred to in the Formula of Subscription, the call letter, and the Form for the Ordination of Ministers. But the Church Order speaks of the fundamental duties of a minister from which the other duties follow.

The duties mentioned specifically in the article include his duties as a minister and as an elder. The duties which he must perform as a minister are as follows:

- 1) To continue in prayer. It is possible that this article refers in this clause to a minister's private prayers, which are so very essential to his work. Nevertheless, it may also refer to the minister's calling to lead the congregation in prayer at public worship, to pray with others and especially with those of his flock who need prayer (cf. Acts 6:4; James 5:14, 15).
- 2) To continue in the ministry of the Word. This, of course, is the heart of the minister's office. All other tasks which he performs are either related to this task or are incidental to it. He may have to perform administrative work; he may write articles or books; there may be other work which he must perform. But this is all incidental to and must never stand in the way of his supreme calling to preach the gospel. This is a principle matter, for this is specifically his authoritative work in which he exercises the authority of Christ. He is a prophet, the mouthpiece of Christ, called to proclaim Christ's Word authoritatively. Never must anything else interfere with this task. Nor must he be tempted from this calling to play the role of psychologist, marriage counselor, doctor, sociologist, or any other work. He must, in the words of the article, *continue* in preaching. He has the one calling to bring the Word of God. To do this he must regularly occupy the pulpit and preach the gospel from Sabbath to Sabbath. But he must also diligently study the Word, filling himself with it and preparing himself to proclaim and expound it.
- 3) To dispense the sacraments. This is also part of the minister's fundamental calling to preach. For the sacraments are the means of grace added to the preaching as the gospel for the eyes of God's people. Thus this belongs to his official work in which he functions with the authority of Christ.

There are various duties not mentioned in the article.

- 1) Teaching catechism. This, too, is part of the preaching of the Word. It is official ministry of the gospel to the lambs of God's flock. It is the means of grace especially adapted to the seed of the covenant to prepare them for their place in the church.
- 2) Sick and family visitation. Here, too, we have part of the minister's official work of preaching. But in this aspect of his work he brings the Word of God privately and applies that Word to the specific needs of the individual members of the congregation. In this he labors also as pastor.
- 3) Officiating at weddings. The Church Order speaks of this part of his work in another place. In this particular work he functions as a servant of the state as well as a minister.

There are also certain duties spoken of in the article which refer to the calling of a minister as elder. It must be remembered that the minister is an elder, although he is a teaching elder. This does not mean that a minister is in a higher or superior office, with authority over his fellow officebearers. He is their equal. But at the same time he is elder as well as minister; pastor as well as teacher.

Because this is true, the duties of a minister as he functions as an elder are more specifically referred to in Article 23. In this article the following duties are mentioned:

- 1) To watch over his brethren. This refers especially to his fellow consistory members, although surely implied is the entire congregation. He is pastor of the whole flock of Christ. He shepherds the entire sheepfold including the officebearers.

- 2) To exercise church discipline. This work he does in cooperation with the other elders. It is part of the government of the church.
- 3) To see to it that everything is done decently and in good order. This must be done within the congregation and the consistory. The rule of decency and good order is Scripture itself. In this work the minister ought to be eminently qualified.

VanDellen and Monsma speak of assistants to the minister which are sometimes used (cf. their Commentary). While this is possible, a minister ought not easily give up his work and the specific duties assigned to him. There is altogether too much of this in our day, even in Reformed churches. And it must be remembered that these assistants can never officially preach the Word of the gospel.

ARTICLE 17

Among the ministers of the Word equality shall be maintained with respect to the duties of their office, and also in other matters as far as possible, according to the judgment of the consistory and, if necessary, of the classis; which equality shall also be maintained in the case of the elders and the deacons.

The historical occasion for this article is the deep-seated fear in which our fathers lived of the horrors of Roman Catholic hierarchy. They detested this evil with all their hearts and included this article to avoid all possibility of it. That such was the position of our fathers is, e.g., evident from the fact that in 1581 the Synod of Middelburg received an overture requesting the appointment of “inspectors and superintendents” to oversee the churches. This practice was followed in some congregations. But, fearing that this would lead to the same hierarchy against which the article was written, the synod rejected this overture on the grounds that it was “*onnoodich ande zorghelick*,” i.e., “unnecessary and dangerous.”

The principle is sound. Hierarchy of any sort has no place in the church of Christ. How often was it not necessary for the Lord to rebuke His disciples because they debated among themselves who was the greatest. Christ is the chief and only Officebearer in His church, and all other officebearers are under Him.

It is well that we define, first of all, the scope of the article in respect to this matter of equality. The article does not refer to the equality of the offices. There are three such offices in the church: the offices of minister, elder, and deacon. And, while these three offices are different in kind, they are not higher or lower offices. There is an equality of the office as such. But the article is not referring to this.

Secondly, the article does not speak of equality among officebearers of various congregations within the denomination. That all officebearers are equal is certainly in complete harmony with Scripture. But this is not the point here, as is evident from the reference to “the judgment of the consistory.”

Finally, the article is not speaking of the various individual differences among officebearers — differences in talents, experience, gifts, zeal, etc.

Rather, the article speaks of equality among those who hold the same office: ministers among ministers (where there are more than one in a congregation); elders among elders; deacons among deacons. And it speaks of equality in that which is of essential importance to the office, namely authority. All officebearers are of equal authority within their own office.

The article speaks especially of equality with respect to the duties of his office. Each officebearer must share equally in the duties of his office. In preaching, catechizing, sick visitation, family visitation, etc., the officebearers must exercise equality. The article, however, adds: “and also in other matters as far as possible.” No doubt this refers to such matters as honor, salary, houses, etc. There is to be no subordination of any kind practiced. Even the idea of an “assistant pastor” is out of keeping with this article. This regulation does not preclude the possibility of variations in some of these things. One minister with a large family may need a larger salary than a minister without a family at all. The point is that all must be treated with equal fairness. Hence the article adds the words: “as far as possible.” It must be recognized that there are differences of time, experience, ability, circumstances, age, etc. which have to be taken into account. Exact equality in all matters is not always possible. Nor is it always wise. But the consistory itself must decide by vote on all these matters. And provision is made for appeal to classis if there is disagreement.

ARTICLE 18

The office of the professors of theology is to expound the Holy Scriptures and to vindicate sound doctrine against heresies and errors.

The article goes back historically to the work of Calvin in the Academy of Geneva. From the beginning, the Reformed churches believed strongly in an educated ministry. This requires professors. While we do not consider the professor of theology to occupy a separate office (cf. notes on Art. 2), this article certainly has a valuable place in the Church Order. More often than not the heresies which sweep the church begin in the seminaries and are brought from the seminaries to the pulpits, where the people are infected.

Two duties especially are mentioned.

- 1) Expound the Holy Scriptures. The idea is that the exposition of Holy Scripture lies at the basis of all the subjects taught in the seminary. Professors are, therefore, to be students of God’s Word, adept at the original languages of Scripture and thorough and careful exegeses of Scripture. They must see to it that this exposition is the basis of all the teaching.
- 2) Vindicate sound doctrine against heresies and errors. It is quite obvious that these two duties cannot be separated from each other. Exposition of Scripture is necessary to accomplish the vindication of sound doctrine and will surely result in it. The errors referred to are all the errors of pagan religions, Roman Catholicism, modernistic religions, sectarian religions; but also heresies which arise within the church and constitute an immediate threat to the well-being of the church.

The duties referred to here are the duties of all ministers of the gospel. But these duties are mentioned specifically in connection with the work of professors because they are entrusted with

the training of future ministers upon whom this calling will fall. They must teach the future ministers of the church to do this work. Besides, professors provide leadership within the churches in this respect. This is not because of their superior abilities and superior office; it is rather because all their time is devoted exclusively to this. Professors must therefore accomplish this in the classroom, in preaching and speaking, in books and articles, at ecclesiastical assemblies of the churches in common.

For rules governing the appointment of professors, confer the Constitution of the Theological School.

ARTICLE 19

The churches shall exert themselves, as far as necessary, that there may be students supported by them to be trained for the ministry of the Word.

The historical background of this article dates to the Synod of Emden. That synod made provision for the support of students who would later be bound to the service of the church which supported them. This was done especially when students were sent out of the country to study at such places as Geneva, Heidelberg, Basel, and Zurich. Later the University of Leyden was established to train ministers in the Lowlands. At the time of the established church, the support of these students was taken over by the government. The money used was from the confiscated property of the Roman Catholic Church. Hence the old name for this fund: “*Ex Bonis Publicis*”; i.e., “Out of the Public Goods.” The name has been changed in our Churches to “Student Aid Fund.”

The duty enjoined upon the churches in common is twofold.

- 1) The chief duty is that the churches shall exert themselves to provide students for the ministry. From the very beginning of the Reformed churches there has been a shortage of ministers. But the Church Order, in this article, recognizes the fact that a congregation without a minister is in an abnormal situation. Nor is this abnormality alleviated by classical appointments. A congregation must, to perform her work, have a pastor of her own. But the duty described in the article is the duty of the congregations individually. If the churches are to have ministers, these ministers must come from the congregations themselves. And, indeed, upon the individual congregations falls the responsibility of preaching the gospel — though this responsibility is performed through the offices in the church.

This exertion must take place through various means. In the general training of covenant youth in catechism, preaching, and family visitation this obligation is brought to the attention of God’s people. The congregations may be admonished through the preaching to give more attention to this responsibility. The consistories may use the means of personal encouragement and admonition.

- 2) Secondly, the duty is placed upon the churches for the support of the students. The length of education requires considerable money. And mere money must not be an obstacle in the pursuit of the calling of the ministry. In our churches this duty is fulfilled by

the churches in common. But this does not preclude the possibility of support coming from the local congregations to aid their “sons”; nor even from the classis.

This support must be “as far as necessary.” This reference is both to the need for ministers and the support given to students. Support should, if necessary, be given throughout the whole time of education. Nor need this support be repaid, since it is support and not a loan. Repayment need be made only when a student does not enter the ministry. For additional rules, confer the Student Aid Committee Constitution.

ARTICLE 20

Students who have received permission according to the rule in this matter, and persons who have according to Article 8 been judged competent to be prepared for the ministry of the Word, shall, for their own training, and for the sake of becoming known to the congregations, be allowed to speak a word of edification in the meetings for public worship.

This article has a long history marked by considerable vacillation on the question of the rightness of student preaching. The article was originally concerned with the private training of students when the work was left to individual ministers because there was no seminary. The Convention of Wezel dealt with the need for students to gain experience in preaching through the means outlined in this article.

In 1586 the Synod of 's Gravenhage ruled favorably on the practice of student preaching. But in 1619 the Synod of Dordrecht forbade the practice. However, Dordrecht forbade the practice in part because the University could no longer be trusted. It was filled with Arminianism. The churches of the Secession in 1834 once again permitted it, but the churches of the Doleantie did not favor the practice. The Gereformeerde Kerken ruled against the practice in 1908, and this has remained the rule. In 1914 the Christian Reformed Church reinstated the idea and composed our present version.

The article refers to the “preaching” of those still studying in the seminary and of those judged competent to preach under the provisions of Article 8. Candidates, while not referred to, are also included. The article refers, therefore, to those who are not ordained to the office.

All these are permitted to “speak a word of edification.” There is a deliberate distinction made between this word of edification and the preaching of the gospel. The difference is to be found in the fact that students may not pronounce the benedictions and may not administer the sacraments. But the basic difference is that the “preaching” of the students is not the official ministry of the Word because these students have not been ordained into office. Thus the idea of the lawful call, of the office, and of the preaching is guarded.

The question has often risen whether this is a valid distinction. Many have maintained that it is not. These point to the following considerations:

- 1) There is no difference in content between preaching and an edifying word.
- 2) If a student edifies he surely is instrumental in administering the means of grace.

- 3) A student is called officially by the consistory for the particular service in which he preaches.

But it is better and more scriptural to maintain the distinction.

- 1) It is certainly true that, ideally, there is no difference in content. But this is not the point. An ordained ambassador has divine credentials, so that he alone can bring the Word of Christ officially and authoritatively.
- 2) An edifying word may be a means of grace, and hopefully it is. But it is a subordinate means of grace, subordinate to the official preaching in the same sense in which society discussions and personal Bible reading are a means of grace.
- 3) In this day of total disregard for the official calling, it is important to insist on this aspect of the office.

The article states reasons why students should be permitted to speak an edifying word. One reason is the good of the students; the other reason is the good of the churches. There has been considerable debate also on this point. The objections which have been raised are:

- 1) Students come with inferior sermons and are not always edifying.
- 2) Churches gain little benefit from these sermons.
- 3) The danger is always there that imperfect exposition and even false doctrine may do considerable harm.

But all these dangers can be avoided if proper supervision is given to student preaching. This supervision is, according to Article 13 of the Constitution of the Theological School, left to the faculty. Supervision includes hearing the sermons to be preached in the churches, making necessary revisions and changes, judging whether a sermon is edifying, giving licensure to preach, revoking this licensure if necessary.

The advantages of this practice are real. The experience which a student gains is inestimable. The congregations receive supply when they are vacant. And the congregations come to know the students and their abilities.

ARTICLE 21

The consistories shall see to it that there are good Christian schools in which the parents have their children instructed according to the demands of the covenant.

The original article of the Synod of Dordrecht was adopted in 1586 at the Synod of Den Haag. This version was considerably different from our present version. It read, "Everywhere Consistories shall see to it, that there are good schoolmasters who shall not only instruct the children in reading, writing, languages, and the liberal arts, but likewise in godliness and in the Catechism."

There were definite reasons why this kind of article was adopted by the churches in the Netherlands. The church was then a state church standing in close connection with the government.

The government was a supporter of the Reformed faith. Hence, the government operated the schools, although this operation was performed through the churches. The churches, therefore, assumed responsibility for the spiritual quality of the schools. And the church gave religious instruction in the schools. Hence the addition to the original article: “and in the Catechism.”

But in America the situation is different. Here there is separation between church and state. And the responsibility for the instruction of the children in the day schools is assumed by the parents.

This is also correct. The responsibility for the instruction of the children in the subjects of the school curriculum rests upon the parents and upon them alone. This instruction is assumed by the parents as their responsibility when they make their vows of baptism. Indeed, the church is responsible for the instruction of the seed of the covenant as far as the knowledge of Scripture is concerned and because this instruction is an official means of grace. But the instruction in the knowledge of God as He reveals Himself to His people through creation, providence, and history is a responsibility resting upon covenant parents.

The article assigns to the consistories a certain responsibility with respect to this covenant instruction given in the schools. It does not mean to establish the principle that the responsibility of establishing, maintaining, supporting, and governing Christian schools rest upon the consistories. This would be parochialism and has never been the position of the Reformed churches. But it does mean to entrust consistories with the solemn obligation to point parents to their covenant obligations and admonish parents to fulfill these obligations to the best of their ability. Note the language of the present article: “... in which parents have their children instructed...”

The consistories have this responsibility because the instruction of children comes under the spiritual supervision of the consistories. The schools which parents establish must be “good” schools. They must be good in the spiritual and ethical sense of that word, not merely from a formal viewpoint. That is, the instruction must be, in the strictest sense of the word, Christian. The knowledge of God must be taught in every branch of learning.

This is according to the demands of the covenant. The covenant is God’s gracious bond of fellowship and friendship established with His elect people through Jesus Christ. It is a covenant which God wills shall be continued through the instrumentality of covenant instruction (cf. Gen. 18:19; Ps. 78:1-8; Prov. 22:6, etc.).

Because this important covenantal obligation rests upon covenant parents, it is part of their calling as a covenant people in the world. This calling and its fulfillment come directly under the supervision of the consistory. Hence the consistory has certain definite responsibilities in this respect.

Among these responsibilities we may mention the following: The consistory must urge the establishment of our own schools where there are none, if this is at all possible. The consistory must urge support of these schools where they exist. The officebearers in Christ’s church must pay attention to the instruction given by the teachers in the schools and encourage the teachers in their work as much as possible. They must encourage young people to study in preparation for a profession of teaching. They must discipline where there is an obvious failure to perform this sacred calling. But never, under any circumstances, must the consistory assume control of the school, the school board, or the society.

ARTICLE 22

The elders shall be chosen by the judgment of the consistory and the deacons according to the regulations for that purpose established by the consistory. In pursuance of these regulations, every church shall be at liberty, according to its circumstances, to give the members an opportunity to direct attention to suitable persons, in order that the consistory may thereupon either present to the congregation for election as many elders as are needed, that they may, after they are approved by it, unless any obstacle arise, be installed with public prayers and stipulations; or present a double number to the congregation and thereupon install the one-half chosen by it, in the aforesaid manner, agreeably to the form for this purpose.

Decision pertaining to Article 22

Nominations and congregational meetings shall be announced upon two successive Sundays. (Adopted by Classis of June 6, 7, 1934; Synod of 1944, Arts. 66, 67.)

While Article 21 begins a new section of the Church Order and deals with a general responsibility resting upon the consistory as a whole, Article 22 begins a discussion of regulations pertaining to the office of elder.

It was John Calvin, the Reformer of Geneva, who once again restored the office of elder to its rightful place in the church of Christ. This office had been all but lost in the Romish church. Calvin saw clearly, from Scripture, the true nature of this office and its importance in the church.

The office of elder has especially two different names in Scripture:

□□ℳ ♦ ◊ ❖ ◆ ℳ □ □ ✕ and ℳ ⚡ □ ✕ ❖ □ ■ □ □ □ ✕. Contrary to the position of Roman Catholicism, these two names designate the same office. They merely look at this one office from two different points of view. In proof of this, confer such passages as Acts 20:17, 28; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:5, 7; I Timothy 3:1; I Peter 5:1, 2. References to this office are also found in Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 6, 22. From all these passages it is evident that this office of elder is a reflection of Christ's kingly office. This office is therefore the ruling office in the church. Christ, the perfect Officebearer, unites in Himself, through His exaltation, the threefold office of prophet, priest, and king. This is, in turn, reflected in His church in men who are endowed with the authority which Christ possesses and which He confers upon men of His choice. As the office of minister reflects the prophetic office of Christ, and as the office of deacon reflects the high priestly office of Christ, so also does the office of elder reflect the ruling office of Christ. The elders, therefore, constitute the ruling body in the church.

This article speaks specifically of the election of elders. Concerning this election of elders, we notice first of all that the consistory and the congregation cooperate in this work. (For a discussion of the principle involved here, cf. notes on Art. 4).

In the second place, the election of elders is essentially the lawful call of elders. That is, it is the call of Christ Himself to the office. The requirements for such a lawful call are therefore, as we may expect, essentially the same as the requirements for the lawful call of ministers.

- 1) Strictly speaking, the examination is eliminated. But the examination is principally performed by the necessity of choosing men who are qualified for this office. These qualifications are listed in Scripture in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. The election of qualified men is of the utmost importance and must be carefully observed.
- 2) Election. There are two methods which can be used, according to this article, just as in the case of ministers. One method is that according to which the consistory presents a nomination of twice the number of elders needed, from which nomination the congregation chooses one-half. The second procedure is one according to which the consistory submits for approbation as many elders as are needed. It is only when this procedure is followed that the congregation must be given the opportunity to suggest suitable persons. But even then, the consistory holds the decisive vote.
- 3) Approbation. The approbation will necessarily be different according to the method of election in use. If the consistory submits to the approbation of the congregation as many elders as are needed, then approbation takes place only once. It is done when the congregation approves of the slate of elders. If the congregation itself votes from a nomination, then approbation takes place twice. It takes place when the nomination is submitted to the congregation for approval (cf. the footnote to the article). And it is done again when the slate of elected elders is submitted for approbation before ordination. This second approbation is required by the Form for the Ordination of Elders and Deacons, which see. Both approbations are important. The first is necessary to keep unworthy and unqualified men from the important office of elders. The second is important to ensure that the men to be installed are worthy to be ordained.
- 4) Installation. According to the article the installation shall take place with public prayers and stipulations according to the Form for that purpose. The Form is important because, on the one hand, it makes for uniformity of practice in all the churches of the federation; and, on the other hand, it gives instruction as to the office and admonishes the congregation and the officebearers concerning their responsibilities.

There are several additional points. The article speaks of local regulations. These local regulations are adopted by each individual consistory. They may include rules on such matters as: brothers or relatives serving on the consistory at the same time; reelection of retiring officebearers; procedure at congregational meetings dealing with matters of voting, majorities, counting ballots, etc.

A footnote is added that nominations and congregational meetings must be announced on two successive Sundays. There are two reasons for this. One is to insure that all the members are informed of the nomination. The second is that opportunity may be given to bring objections against the nomination or against the election.

ARTICLE 23

The office of the elders, in addition to what was said in Article 16 to be their duty in common with the minister of the Word, is to take heed that the ministers, together with their fellow-elders and the deacons, faithfully discharge their office, and both before and after the Lord's Supper, as time and circumstances may demand, for the edification of the churches, to visit the families of the congregation,

in order particularly to comfort and instruct the members, and also to exhort others in respect to the Christian religion.

Article 23 speaks of the duties of elders. The word “office” in the article is used in the same sense in which it was used in Article 16; i.e., in the sense of task or duty.

The duties of elders are only briefly described and the article is not intended to be exhaustive. There are probably several reasons for this.

- 1) The Wezelian Convention included a long list of the duties of elders, but this was shortened considerably by the Synod of 's Gravenhage in 1586.
- 2) The duties of elders are described in more detail in other places. They are described in part in Article 16. They are described in other articles of the Church Order as, e.g., in the articles which deal with Christian discipline. They are described in the Form for Installation.
- 3) The purpose of the Church Order is to set forth these duties only in a general way so as to distinguish the office of elder from the office of minister and the office of deacon.

In general, the office of elder is that of government or supervision. This government is, first of all, over the congregation. The elders must see to it that they “exercise church discipline ... and that everything is done decently and in good order.” This refers to the doctrine and life of all the members of the congregation. It lays also upon elders the responsibility for censure and excommunication. Each individual is under the supervision of the consistory in all his walk and life from a spiritual viewpoint. But the consistory must also supervise the organic life of the congregation in societies, congregational meetings, etc.

Secondly, the work of the consistory is that of supervision of their fellow officebearers. The purpose is to see to it that all the officebearers perform their duties faithfully. The elders must see to it that the deacons, both collectively and individually, perform the duties of their office in dispensing the mercies of Christ. The deacons are not a ruling body. They are under the supervision of the elders and are accountable to them. The minister is also under the supervision of the elders. He, too, is subject to their rule. This is true as far as his personal life is concerned. He is not above the consistory in any way. His doctrine and conversation are subject to the scrutiny of the consistory. But especially his preaching is under their supervision. But the authority of the elders must also be exercised among themselves. Each individual elder is under the supervision of the body to which he belongs.

It is important for the wellbeing of the church that the elders faithfully perform their work. Each elder has the individual calling to watch over the church and he must, of necessity, engage in much personal labor. However, he has his authority only in conjunction with the other elders, so that no individual elder can take unilateral action. Every decision must be by the body, and the official action of the elders must be by the consistory as a whole.

This article calls special attention to the work of family visitation. It emphasizes very strongly the need of this work, devoting almost half the article to this subject.

The article requires that this work be conducted “both before and after the Lord’s Supper.” This requirement has its historical occasion in the history of the Reformed churches in the Neth-

erlands. Many, in the early days, had just left the Romish church and had need of a great deal of instruction, admonition, encouragement, and help. It was necessary to inquire whether the members were prepared to celebrate the Lord's Supper; and whether, after the Supper was celebrated, they had received the benefits of this means of grace.

The article adds: "... as time and circumstances may demand." Hence we, as a general rule, conduct family visitation once per year. But we ought never, on this account, to minimize its importance. It is a most wonderful opportunity to bring the Word of God to the individuals in the church of Christ and address that Word of God to the particular needs of each member.

The article makes this work the work of the elders, not excluding the pastor. It states the purpose of doing this work as being:

- 1) The edification of the church;
- 2) The comfort and instruction of the members;
- 3) The exhortation of others.

This last has caused some question. Without doubt it refers to people outside the church. This, too, has its origin in the early history of the Reformed state church. The consistory in a given area was entrusted with the responsibility of the spiritual care of all the people within its boundaries. Hence, this stipulation scarcely applies any longer as far as its historical intention is concerned. Yet it can be interpreted to refer to the calling of each consistory to perform the work of the "extension of God's kingdom, especially the promotion of missions" (cf. the questions asked at the time of Church Visitation).

ARTICLE 24

The deacons shall be chosen, approved, and installed in the same manner as was stated concerning the elders.

The office of the deacons, while instituted by the apostles in the early church, was lost in the Roman Catholic Church. It was reinstated in the churches of the Reformation which followed John Calvin's teachings.

Article 24 deals specifically with election to the office of deacons. It prescribes the same procedure for their lawful call as for the elders. This includes, once again, all the elements of the lawful call of any officebearer (cf. Arts. 22 and 4). This is proof of the fact that the office of deacons is on a par with the other offices in the church of Christ.

While the article does not mention anything concerning the nature of the office and the qualifications of the deacons, this is quite in harmony with the Church Order. This is not done with respect to the other offices. In every case, only the election and task of officebearers is defined. Nevertheless, we may, in brief, observe the following.

As far as the nature of the office is concerned, negatively, the deacons do not constitute a business office or central accounting agency in the church. Nor are the deacons younger men in training for the office of elders to which presently they shall graduate. The office is not a natural office but a spiritual one. Positively, the office is on a par with the other offices in the church. It

is instituted in the church to manifest Christ as the merciful High Priest of His people. The qualifications of the office are spiritual therefore. Men must be sought who possess these spiritual qualifications. They are unique to the office. It is quite possible that some men have qualifications for the office of deacon, but not for the office of elder. The opposite is also possible.

These qualifications are found in Acts 6:1-7 and I Timothy 3:8-12. They are summarized in the Form for the Installation of Officebearers. These qualifications must fit the deacons for being *diakonoi*, i.e., those who *serve*. Thus, the task of deacons, though related to the material and physical needs of the people of God, is essentially a spiritual task requiring men with spiritual qualifications.

The office of deacons is frequently de-emphasized and even lost in today's church. This is, in part, due to the inroads of government welfare; in part due to the tendency of our times to seek help from every source but the church. The office of deacons is worthy of renewed study and practice.

ARTICLE 25

The office peculiar to the deacons is diligently to collect alms and other contributions of charity and, after mutual counsel, faithfully and diligently to distribute the same to the poor as their needs may require it; to visit and comfort the distressed and to exercise care that the alms are not misused; of which they shall render an account in consistory, and also (if anyone desires to be present) to the congregation, at such a time as the consistory may see fit.

This article sets forth briefly the duties of deacons and is not intended to be a detailed and exhaustive enumeration of their work. The main and prescriptive elements are mentioned.

Before we look more closely at the duties mentioned in the article, two remarks should be made. In the first place, the deacons must put forth every effort to resist the encroachment of the government into this area of the church's calling. This must be done by instruction of the people of God and by faithful performance of the work by the deacons. Secondly, the work of the deacons must not be construed to *preclude* the personal acts of mercy among the saints mutually.

The duties mentioned are the following:

- 1) The deacons must collect the alms and other contributions of charity. There is no difference between the two words. Alms refer to gifts of mercy. The word comes from the Greek $\mu\epsilon\tau\epsilon\omicron\mu\omicron\sigma\iota\varsigma$. Contributions of charity mean gifts in addition to the usual funds collected at the worship service. These include gifts of food, clothing, real estate, legacies, etc. Both, however, refer to gifts and not to payments. The deacons are not in business.

The article defines the office of deacons as being to collect these gifts. This is not merely a reference to passing the collection plate during the worship service. The reference is to the fact that the deacons must be able to carry on their calling by obtaining from the congregation the necessary funds. The congregation has the solemn obligation to provide the deacons with ample funds; but the congregation must be made aware of the

need. There must be close cooperation between congregation and the deacons that this may be accomplished.

- 2) Secondly, the article mentions faithful and diligent distribution. The work must be done with faithfulness and diligence because it is the Lord Christ's work. It is a work of mercy which reflects in the church the mercy Christ shows to His people. It must be work done promptly. The poor must not suffer. Hence the deacons must constantly be looking for those who need assistance.

Distribution implies the spiritual work of the office. The deacons must not allow their office to degenerate into a welfare office which merely mails out checks. They must bring the assistance personally (cf. below).

The standard is "according to need." This is, of course, a matter of discretion and wisdom. Need, generally speaking, implies and includes the things of ordinary comfort. There should be, in the lives of God's people, no lack. But it is always better, and more in keeping with the Scriptures, for the deacons to err on the side of liberality than on the side of stinginess. The need must, however, be determined by the deacons, not by the poor.

In passing we may note that Christian school tuition is certainly a need.

The article speaks of distributing the alms "after mutual counsel." The deacons may never act individually. The matter of benevolence must be discussed in the deacons' meetings. The needs of the poor must be discussed; the amount and kind of aid; and any other problems which may arise. It is this rule which reduces the possibility of arbitrariness and misuse of benevolent funds. But the rule does not preclude the possibility of an emergency committee of the deacons which is given power to act in matters of great urgency.

- 3) Thirdly, the article speaks of visiting and comforting those in distress. The deacons' duty is not simply the relief of the material needs of God's people. The deacons represent Christ, our High Priest; and their duty is to bring comfort and sympathy by means of the Word of God. They must do this also in connection with the alms which they distribute. Hence, their work is not only with the poor, but also with the distressed. This refers particularly to widows and orphans. But in this work they function with the authority of the Word of God (cf. the Form for Installation).
- 4) Fourthly, the deacons must exercise care against misuse of the alms. There are, conceivably, two evils. One is carnality on the part of the poor. The other is mismanagement of funds. The alms are not for wasteful and luxurious living. Thus the work of the deacons includes also the right to investigate the financial circumstances of the poor. They may have to advise various changes in the way in which these people live. They may have to instruct in the principles of Christian stewardship. They may have to adjust the giving of alms from time to time. They may have to distribute the alms in other ways than cash grants.

All of this implies that there must be cooperation between the deacons and the poor. On the part of the deacons, there ought never to be need for inquisition and needless invasion of privacy. On the part of the poor, there ought to be honesty and frankness to make their situation known.

- 5) Finally, the deacons are required to render account of their activities to the consistory. The reason for this is obvious. The deacons are not independent, but are under the supervision of the elders, who are the ruling body (cf. Art. 23). These reports to the elders should be regular, and of sufficient detail for the elders to determine whether the deacons are faithfully doing their work. A mere financial report is not sufficient.

The deacons must also render account to the congregation. This is not to gain congregational approval however. But the work of mercy is the work of the congregation, which it performs through the office of deacons. Hence, the congregation must know whether the work is being carried out. The report must be made with discretion, so that names and amounts are not revealed, and “at such a time as the consistory may see fit.”

ARTICLE 26

In places where others are devoting themselves to the care of the poor, the deacons shall seek a mutual understanding with them, to the end that the alms may all the better be distributed among those who have the greatest need. Moreover, they shall make it possible for the poor to make use of institutions of mercy, and to that end they shall request the board of directors of such institutions to keep in close touch with them. It is also desirable that the diaconates assist and consult one another, especially in caring for the poor in such institutions.

In general, this article is also rooted in the history of the Reformation churches in the Lowlands. Its original formulations were made in the light of the church-state relations which existed in the Netherlands. Our present article dates back to the Synod of Dordrecht and contains some provisions not applicable to our present times. Particularly, the government engaged in works of mercy through various agencies and bureaus, and the church was forced to cooperate with them.

However, once again we reiterate the principle: the Reformation reaffirmed the work of deacons and established this office in the church. The office must be closely guarded so that no other agencies are allowed to intrude into this work. The church is solely responsible for the care of the poor.

Quite naturally, in our country several problems arise with respect to such matters as social security, unemployment benefits, old age pensions, etc. A great deal of wisdom is required to maintain the office in these respects.

The article speaks of diaconal cooperation and urges cooperation in three areas:

- 1) The first is “where others are devoting themselves to the care of the poor.” This refers specifically to the government in the Netherlands. In our country it would probably refer to such agencies as government welfare agencies, the Red Cross, etc. It would be preferable if this part of the article could be dropped. However, even during the Depression of the 1930s many church families were on government relief because the church was unable to care for them.
- 2) The second relation spoken of in the article is that between diaconates and institutions of mercy. The duty of the deacons is to “make it possible for the poor to use such institu-

tions.” By this is meant such institutions as homes for the aged, Pine Rest, institutions for retarded children, etc. If the poor cannot afford their use, but must have this care, our deacons shall make such care available and provide for the payments.

In order that this may be done effectively, the article speaks of cooperation between the directors of such institutions and the deacons.

- 3) The third relation spoken of is one of mutual assistance and consultation between diaconates. This does not refer to broader diaconal assemblies comparable to classis and synod. It refers rather to mutual consultation and assistance between local diaconates. The principles are that, while one diaconate may not intrude upon the domain of another, nevertheless the bond of unity between congregations must be expressed and enriched by diaconal cooperation. One congregation may have many poor, while another has few. The injunction of Scripture applies: “Bear one another’s burdens.”
- 4) Finally, as a footnote, we may observe that the first obligation of support rests upon a person’s family. This is in keeping with I Timothy 5:8. This principle is often neglected.

ARTICLE 27

The elders and deacons shall serve two or more years according to local regulations, and a proportionate number shall retire each year. The retiring officers shall be succeeded by others, unless the circumstances and the profit of any church, in the execution of Articles 22 and 24, render a reelection advisable.

Decision pertaining to Article 27

In case of difficulties in the congregation, the officebearers then serving shall continue to function until their chosen successors can be installed.

(Adopted by Classis of June 6, 7, 1934; Synod of 1944, Arts. 66, 67.)

This article has a rather important history. The principle, namely that the offices of elder and deacon are not permanent, was maintained already by John Calvin. He was afraid of the hierarchy of the Romish church and found nothing in Scripture to indicate that the term of elders and deacons must be for life. He therefore instituted the principle of mandatory retirement.

In the early history of the Reformed churches, both in Geneva and in the Netherlands, the term of office was set at one year. Soon it was extended to two years. And later to a longer term yet. Our present article dates from the 1905 revision in the Netherlands and the 1914 edition adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in our country.

At present, in the Netherlands, longer terms are common, sometimes extending five or six years. In our churches, the general rule is three years.

The principle of the article is, negatively, that the office of elder and deacon is not permanent. Scripture itself is silent on the matter. It is, therefore, a matter to be decided upon by the general principle of the well-being of the church. The chief reason for maintaining a limited tenure is the constant and very real danger of hierarchy within the church. (For detailed arguments pro and con, cf. VanDellen and Monsma, pp. 125, 126.)

The article speaks of a limited tenure, the minimum of which is to be two years. This is considered to be the minimum for effective labor in the offices referred to. Generally speaking, two years is indeed the minimum; longer terms are surely desirable. Both the profit of the officebearers individually and the profit of the congregation are served by longer terms. Even with three-year terms, one-third of the consistory changes every year. Especially when some problem is with the congregation for an extended period of time, changes in the consistory make it difficult to deal effectively with the problem. This is, however, a matter of local regulation and is under the jurisdiction of the consistory.

Definite retirement from office means that those who have filled their terms shall retire and be succeeded by others. This retirement must be on a proportionate basis. Since the retiring officebearers are to be succeeded by others, they are not eligible for reelection. The period of retirement is not stipulated in the article. This, too, is a matter of local regulation. The minimum is, of course, one year. This minimum is the general rule in our churches for the reason that qualified men should not be idle.

Provision is made for reelection under certain circumstances. The article reads: "... unless the circumstances and the profit of any church, in the execution of Articles 22 and 24, render a reelection advisable." This usually refers to the possibility of failing to obtain a new nomination of qualified men. But should a man be renominated without the minimum of one-year retirement, he must retire first and then be reelected.

The footnote speaks of one exception to the rule concerning retirement. It permits continuation in office in case of difficulties in the congregation. These difficulties are of such a kind that they make installation of new officebearers unwise or impossible. These difficulties may be trouble in the congregation, trouble involving one or more of the retiring officebearers, trouble involving one or more of the newly elected officebearers. Installation is then postponed temporarily.

ARTICLE 28

The consistory shall take care that the churches, for the possession of their property and the peace and order of their meetings, can claim the protection of the authorities; it should be well understood, however, that for the sake of peace and material possession they may never suffer the royal government of Christ over His church to be in the least infringed upon.

Article 28, which speaks of the responsibility of the consistory with respect to church property, is a formulation adopted in 1914 by the Christian Reformed Church. The original Article 28 adopted in the Netherlands at the time of the Synod of Dordrecht spoke of a closer relation between church and state than that which is found in this country. It was more in harmony with Article 36 of the Belgic Confession. The original article reads:

As it is the duty of the Christian governments to promote the sacred services of the churches as much as possible, and to recommend their activity to all their subjects by personal example, and to assist the ministers, elders, and deacons in all cases of need or emergency, and to protect them

in the execution of their tasks as governors of the churches, so also the ministers, elders, and deacons are in duty bound zealously and in sincerity to urge obedience, love, and respect toward the magistrates upon the whole congregation; they shall, moreover, make themselves good examples to the church in this matter, and through the manifestation of due respect and the establishment of correspondence with the civil authorities they shall endeavor to secure and hold the good will of the government toward the churches; to the end that, each doing his duty in the fear of the Lord, all suspicion and distrust may be avoided and that thus due cooperation may be maintained for the welfare of the churches.

While the historical occasion for this formulation is not known, Joh. Jansen speaks of two possible reasons for the adoption of the article in its original form. One is the possibility that the church wanted to secure civil approval for the Church Order with the intent to raise it to the level of civil law. The other is that the church wanted to avoid Erastianism, which the Arminians favored.

Whatever the reason may be, the present article is rooted in the view of this country that church and state must be separated. The church and state occupy two distinct Christ-given spheres of authority which may never be merged or blurred. Neither the one nor the other may intrude outside its own sphere into the sphere of another. Nevertheless, there are mutual responsibilities. The church is obligated to obey the civil authorities and instruct her members to do so as long as the state does not demand obedience to some law which is a violation of God's will. The state, in our country, is obligated to provide for peaceful Sabbath worship and to protect the property of the church.

This article, in the light of this situation, places certain responsibilities upon the consistory. The consistory must, in behalf of the congregation, protect the temporal possessions of the church. The congregation as a whole, functioning through the consistory, must act responsibly with respect to her property. The congregation is placed in the position of stewardship over the property the Lord has entrusted to her — property which is the means to promote the historical manifestation of the kingdom. The consistory must, therefore, take care that the church is in a legal position to claim the protection of the civil magistrates. This involves, first of all, organization and incorporation. While incorporation is not specifically mentioned in the article, this matter is referred to in the questions asked by the church visitors, which confer. This is not only a matter of right; it is a matter of duty, according to the article.

But there is an important limitation. The Church Order recognizes the fact that the state is often hostile to the church; that the state has in the past and will in the future attempt to impose itself upon the sphere of the church. This must never be permitted. The church owes her allegiance in all these matters solely to Christ her Head. Hence, the church must resist any effort on the part of the state to infringe upon Christ's royal government in the church, even if it means loss of peace and temporal possessions.

OF THE ECCLESIASTICAL ASSEMBLIES

ARTICLE 29

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

With this article we begin a new section of the Church Order, which deals with the question of the assemblies in the church. This is a very important section of the Church Order, since it deals with the principles of church federation.

While we shall, in our discussion of the articles, have occasion to discuss various principles involved in the matter of church federation, it is advisable from the outset to notice several important matters:

- 1) The deepest principle of all church federation is the unity of the body of Christ. This unity is organic unity of the elect body which is chosen in Christ from all eternity.
- 2) The church of Christ, inasmuch as it is called to manifest itself as institute in the world, is called also to manifest its unity in institutional form as much as possible.
- 3) This unity, because it is a unity in Christ, has a common life principle in Christ. It is the principle of one faith, one hope, one doctrine, one calling (cf. Eph. 4:1-14 and similar passages). It is this unity which the church seeks to express.
- 4) This unity, however, cannot be imposed on the church. It must arise out of the organic life of the church.
- 5) The local congregation is, in itself, a full and complete manifestation of the body of Christ and is, because of this, autonomous.
- 6) But the congregations together seek to express their common unity in a federation of churches, the purpose of which is to confess in unison the truth of God in Christ, to fight together in the battle of faith against a common enemy, to fulfill a mutual calling, to satisfy a practical need which believers have of each other.

It is not surprising that the Church Order deals with the practical regulations of this institutional aspect of church federation. This is in keeping with the whole Church Order.

The division of the articles in this section is as follows:

- 1) Articles 29-36 — General rules
- 2) Articles 37-40 — Rules concerning the consistory.
- 3) Articles 41-46 — Rules concerning classis.
- 4) Articles 47-49 — Rules concerning particular synods.
- 5) Articles 50-52 — Rules concerning general synods.

Article 29 deals with the kinds of assemblies which shall be recognized in the church. From the very beginning of the Reformation in Geneva under Calvin, consistory meetings were held. As the churches grew, and understood better their calling, the need for synods was felt. These synods were first held in the Reformed churches in France. In the Low Countries, the first synod was held in Emden in 1571 and provided for the four assemblies mentioned in this article. The need for classes and particular synods was felt for two reasons especially. The first was the need to facilitate the work of the churches in common. The second was to deal with problems unique to a particular section of the church.

Turning to a brief discussion of the various assemblies which the article mentions, we may note the following:

- 1) The article mentions, first of all, consistories. The term itself comes from the Latin *consistorium*, which means “meeting place.” The Dutch term *kerkeraad* means “church council.”

The consistory is composed of the ministers and elders and is chosen by the church. Sometimes the deacons are included (cf. Art. 37).

The consistory alone possesses the authority of Christ to preach the gospel, to administer the sacraments, and to administer Christian discipline. It is entrusted with the rule of Christ’s sheep. It is the sole power in the church, the only assembly vested with Christ’s authority.

We may notice in this connection that the congregational meetings stand closely connected to the work of the consistory, inasmuch as the office of believers functions through the consistory. (For discussion of this, cf. notes on Art. 4.)

- 2) *Secondly*, the article mentions classes. The classis is a regional assembly. It is of varying size, depending upon the number of churches within an area. The classical boundaries ought, ideally, to be determined by various relevant geographical factors. Classis is composed of two delegates from each consistory. These delegates are authorized to function at classis by virtue of authorization given them by the consistory in the Credentials.

The classis is not a permanent body, nor indeed a super-consistory. Its sphere of activity is closely circumscribed.

- 3) *Thirdly*, the article mentions synods. The synod is the denomination-wide assembly. The representatives are not from the churches, but from the classes. In our churches, ten delegates are sent from each classis. Also the sphere of synod’s activities is closely circumscribed.

ARTICLE 30

In these assemblies ecclesiastical matters only shall be transacted and that in an ecclesiastical manner. In major assemblies only such matters shall be dealt with as could not be finished in minor assemblies, or such as pertain to the churches of the major assembly in common.

Article 30 is one of the fundamental articles of this section dealing with the general rules of ecclesiastical assemblies. It touches upon the basic and all-important question of what matters rightly belong at ecclesiastical assemblies; i.e., what matters are of the sphere of the church of Christ and what matters legally belong before assemblies which represent Christ’s church.

Three distinct matters are treated, which we shall deal with separately:

- 1) Assemblies are limited to the treatment of ecclesiastical matters.
- 2) Assemblies must perform their work in an ecclesiastical manner.

3) Major assemblies are limited in what ecclesiastical matters they may deal with.

With respect to the first matter, that assemblies are limited to the treatment of ecclesiastical matters, there is the important principle involved of the sphere of the authority of the church. It is a sphere of authority distinct from the state, the home, etc. Its sphere of authority is the *spiritual* life of the people of God. Its sphere is the gathering of the church through the preaching of the gospel. Hence, in general, ecclesiastical matters are matters which have to do with the preaching of the gospel.

In particular, and negatively, the church must not involve herself in matters of civil, social, educational, industrial, and political concern. The church today is intent on involving herself in all these matters and is consequently prostituting her true calling to attain this end. But this spells her destruction. Indeed, the ecclesiastical assemblies of our churches (particularly our consistories) are being more and more bombarded with requests to become involved in these matters, a temptation which must be strenuously resisted.

Positively, ecclesiastical matters are in principle matters which pertain to the official calling of the church—the ministry of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, the exercise of discipline, and (as becomes evident in subsequent articles) the regulation of divine worship services. The latter is included because it pertains directly to the preaching.

In addition to the above is also to be included matters which pertain to the spiritual walk of the saints. This is implied in the matter of discipline. This walk of the saints includes the whole of their life in every sphere: socially, politically, economically, etc. But, nevertheless, this is true only insofar as this walk is spiritual. Only this spiritual aspect of the walk of the saints can become the proper business of the ecclesiastical assemblies. For example, the church may not busy herself in the internal affairs of the Christian day schools. But if a teacher teaches false doctrine, the church must make this her concern.

Secondly, the article speaks of the need to transact business in an ecclesiastical manner. The principle involved here is that the authority of the church is limited to the power of the Word of God, which is the rule of the faith and life of the saints. This Word of God is, therefore, the only power which ecclesiastical assemblies have.

Negatively, this means that the church does not wield the power of the sword, which is given to the civil magistrates. There is no room in the church of Christ for coercion, threatening, physical punishment, etc. Nor is the church a political assembly which makes use of parliamentary maneuvering to gain certain ends. Some have even claimed that rules of parliamentary procedure are a hindrance to the work of the church. While this is manifestly false, for rules are good and have their proper place, it must be remembered that rules must not be allowed to interfere with the transactions; they must be a means to serve the assemblies better.

Positively, the only power in the church is the persuasive power of the Word of God, which is of sole authority in the church. All decisions must, therefore, be taken by means of consideration of all matters in the light of Scripture, our confessions, and the Church Order. The persuasive power of the assemblies must be conviction on the basis of Scripture. Through mutual consultation, consideration, and admonition the assemblies must be brought to bow together before God's Word. This willingness to bow before God's Word is the only proper spirit of an ecclesiastical assembly.

In the third place, major assemblies are limited as to which ecclesiastical matters they may deal with.

The Church Order distinguishes between “major” and “minor” assemblies. There has been a considerable amount of discussion concerning the proper terminology to be used. Some have used “higher” and “lower”; others “broader” and narrower.” But these latter terms have often been used to support the idea of a hierarchical form of church government. Especially was this true of the terms “higher” and “lower.” The idea was, then, that there is an increase in authority as one moves upward in the echelons of assemblies. Others have insisted that the terms are proper, but that the term “higher” refers to the consistory, while “lower” refers to classis and synod. But this terminology does not accurately define the relative status of the various assemblies.

Even the terms “minor” and “major,” meaning “less” and “more,” are subject to debate. The question still is: minor and major in what respect?

Surely the answer to these problems is to be found in the fact that the terms cannot refer to more or less authority, so that the major assemblies have authority over the minor assemblies. Rather, the real authority of the Word of God rests only in the consistory. The consistory alone (never a classis or a synod) has the authority to preach the gospel, to administer the sacraments, and to exercise discipline. There is, therefore, a difference only in activity and representation. The churches agree to labor together under the Church Order and assign different tasks to different assemblies while honoring these decisions within the church federation.

The article stipulates: “In major assemblies only such matters shall be dealt with as could not be finished in minor assemblies, or such as pertain to the churches of the major assembly in common.”

Matters which cannot be finished in the minor assemblies are brought to the major assemblies. That is, these matters are brought from consistory to classis to synod.

By “finished” is meant particularly matters of dispute which cannot be settled between the parties involved (cf. Art. 31). But every effort must be made to finish them on a minor assembly before they are brought to a major assembly. The tendency to rush to major assemblies with problems is all too common, so that a warning against this abuse must be sounded. Consistories too are under solemn obligation to solve their own problems on their level and not simply to pass their problems on to major assemblies. They are the officebearers in the church and must not quickly relegate their problems to other assemblies.

Matters which belong to the churches of the major assembly in common are also properly treated by the major assemblies. Some of these matters belong to classis, e.g., church visitation. Some matters belong to synod, as, e.g., matters of the Theological School. These matters may come to the major assemblies either by action initiated on a minor assembly, as, e.g., when a consistory brings an overture to classis and synod; or may be initiated by the major assembly if a problem is presented to it. These major assemblies may not simply initiate action, however. The problem demanding attention must come to them from consistory, classis, or one of synod’s committees.

Hence the sphere of action is clearly circumscribed.

ARTICLE 31

If anyone complain that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to a major ecclesiastical assembly, and whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God or with the articles of the Church Order, as long as they are not changed by the general synod.

Decision pertaining to Article 31

Appeal to a major gathering against any decision of an ecclesiastical body must be made upon the immediately following meeting of the body to which appeal is directed, at the same time giving notification to the secretary of the body by whose decision he is aggrieved. Of every judgment rendered in the case, those concerned shall receive a notification.

(Adopted by Classis of June 6, 7, 1934; Synod of 1944, Arts. 66, 67.)

This article, too, includes one of the most fundamental principles of Reformed church polity. This is true for two reasons. In the first place, it emphasizes the supreme authority of the Word of God in the life of the church. In the second place, it protects the sanctity of the individual conscience before God. Its principle is involved in almost every division within the church, and it surely is the basis for every “case” which arises in the church. It is important that its teaching be clearly understood. Several matters are treated.

- 1) In the first place, the article speaks of the binding power of ecclesiastical decisions. While the article mentions only decisions taken on appeals, the principle applies, of course, to all decisions.

Matters decided upon by majority vote are settled and binding. As far as the terms are concerned, “majority vote” means more than half of the legally cast votes. By “settled” is meant that the matter is no longer a proper subject for discussion and debate. This does not, of course, preclude the possibility of continued discussion of the matter by individuals; but it does mean that any agitation and propaganda against the decision is improper in the church. By “binding” is meant that it is now obligatory on the churches and the members to obey and execute the decisions.

These decisions which are adopted by majority vote are settled and binding not because the majority has sufficient power to impose its will upon the minority and force conformity to its decisions. Nor is this intended to be merely a convenient way to settle disputes and differences of opinion. Rather, a majority vote determines that a matter is in harmony with the Word of God and the Church Order. That such is the case must be demonstrated in the decision, for the compelling nature of the decision rests upon the authority of the Word of God.

- 2) Secondly, the article provides for the right of appeal.

It is interesting to note, first of all, that the entire Church Order makes no provision for protest. It does not include protest as such in the ecclesiastical procedure chiefly because of the provision of Article 30: “as could not be finished in minor assemblies.” The idea is that to finish a matter presupposes some procedure similar to what we have come to call “protest.”

The article speaks of appeal only in cases of being wronged. To appeal means to bring a decision from a minor assembly to a major assembly for reconsideration. Being wronged does not mean necessarily being personally wronged by receiving a personal injustice. It is possible that this is the case. But the meaning is rather that one is wronged by a decision because it conflicts with the Word of God or the Church Order. If the matter is of such a kind that to submit to the decision will violate one's conscience before God, such a one must appeal. He is deeply committed to the welfare of the church. If it becomes apparent to him that the church is straying from the Word of God, seeking that welfare will prompt him to appeal the decision.

The order of appeal must always be from consistory to classis to synod. The exception to this is when a decision of the classis is appealed. Then the appellant need not go through consistory. If a person is wronged by the decision of a synod, generally speaking he has one opportunity to protest the decision of synod to attempt to show the wrong of the decision. But this must be the end. The voice of synod is the voice of the churches. And only then does one appeal to synod against a decision of synod, when he is not directly affected by the decision as originally taken, becomes acquainted with the decision through the printed Acts, and believes that he is able to shed more light on the problem.

The method of appeal is also discussed in the statement: "...unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God or with the articles of the Church Order, as long as they are not changed by a general synod."

The first question which arises in this connection is: To whom must it be proved that a decision is contrary to the Word of God or the articles of the Church Order? Some have maintained that this must be proved only to the satisfaction of the one appealing. But this cannot be true. This would lead to individualism in the church and, ultimately, to anarchy. Rather, it must be proved to the satisfaction of the body to which the appeal is directed.

Secondly, the question arises whether the decision is binding during the time that appeal is being made. The question can also be formulated: "Can one consider a decision not binding because he considers it contrary to Scripture?" Or: "Can the word 'unless' be changed to 'until' as far as the meaning is concerned?" Is this the intent of the Church Order? This is a very important question, and repeatedly arises in church controversy. The answer is that indeed the decisions must be considered settled and binding while appeal is being made, i.e., *until* it has been proved to conflict with the Word of God. To assume any other position would also lead to anarchy and chaos in the church. And, surely, while an appeal is being processed and treated, the matter has not yet been proved to conflict with God's Word and must be assumed to express the truth of God's Word. However, an ecclesiastical assembly can withhold execution of a decision as long as an appeal is pending. And an individual may be granted permission to submit to the extent that although he does not acquiesce in the decision he will not militate against it publicly. He need not execute the decision while his appeal is pending. Usually this is possible.

If a decision is against his appeal after the full course of appeal has been followed, the individual has two alternatives. If possible, he should remain within the federation of churches and submit to the decision. He can do this only with a free conscience, of course. If, on the other hand, his conscience will not permit him to submit, then he has no choice but to leave the church federation. This he has the right to do without ecclesiastical penalty. Each man has to answer before God for his own conscience. And if the church has departed from the truth of God's

Word, he must, by doing this, engage in church reformation. This is the reason why Article 31 is a precious Reformation principle.

ARTICLE 32

The proceedings of all assemblies shall begin by calling upon the name of God and be closed with thanksgiving.

The Synod of Emden was the first to make provision for prayers at ecclesiastical assemblies. This synod stipulated that there be one prayer, either by the minister of the church where the meeting was held or by the president of the preceding meeting, with a view to the election of officers. Then another prayer was to be offered with a view to the business to be transacted. Nothing was said concerning a prayer of thanksgiving. The Synod of Middelburg (1581) changed this by dropping the special prayer prior to the election of officers.

The article specifies the time when prayers shall be offered and the nature of these prayers. Prior to the proceedings of the assembly, prayer must be made “calling upon the name of God.” After the assembly has finished its work, the meeting must be closed with “thanksgiving.” The idea is that at the beginning of the meeting the assembly make supplication to God for guidance in deciding the matters of the agenda and for the necessary spiritual gifts to perform the work well. At the end, the assembly must be conscious of God’s blessing which has rested upon the meeting and must adjourn with the confession: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us....” Thus thanksgiving is made for God’s manifestations of favor, tokens of love, and blessings of grace.

There was a time when liturgical prayers were used. But this is not usually done in our day. They ought no longer to be necessary in the church as they once were when the Reformation churches were in their infancy.

There are two principles involved in this article. The first is that Article 30 demands that all business transacted be done in an ecclesiastical manner. Prayer is surely a part of the ecclesiastical manner of ecclesiastical assemblies where Christ rules. The second principle, closely related to the first, is that Christ is the only King of His church, under whose sovereign rule all the business of the church must be conducted and in the light of whose Word all decisions must be made.

A couple of additional points, while not specifically mentioned in the article, are of importance here. The first concerns prayers in the consistory before divine services. The occasion for the beginning of this practice was the persecution of the churches of the Secession, when worship services were often interrupted and disturbed. The blessing of the Lord was sought upon the minister, the congregation, and the services held. This practice was continued both in the Netherlands and in this country. This is good. However, often times these prayers are much too lengthy and deal with consistorial matters. They should be short and should be limited to seeking the blessing of God upon the worship service and upon those who participate.

Secondly, a growing, but dissatisfactory trend characterizes many ecclesiastical assemblies today. This is the trend towards using the assembly meetings for sermons, devotional addresses, inspirational meetings, and honorary banquets. This should not be done. Assemblies should remain with the business for which they have been called together.

ARTICLE 33

Those who are delegated to the assemblies shall bring with them their credentials and instructions, signed by those sending them, and they shall have a vote in all matters except such as particularly concern their persons or churches.

Decisions pertaining to Article 33

- A. To promote uniformity the credential letter for delegation to major assemblies shall end in the following form: "With instruction and authority to take part in all deliberations and transactions regarding all matters coming legally before the meeting and transacted in agreement with the Word of God according to the conception of it embodied in the doctrinal standards of the Protestant Reformed Churches, as well as in harmony with the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches."
- B. The major assemblies shall also have a stated clerk, who however shall not hold the position of permanent secretary, and who shall not be a member of the assemblies' officers, but that of a deputy to serve the classis or synod with services which would otherwise constitute the task of such a functionary.

(Adopted by Classis of June 6, 7, 1934; Synod of 1944, Arts. 66, 67; Synod of 1946, Art. 19. See also formulas for classical and synodical credentials, pp. 121, 122.)

Article 33 was drawn up at the time when the state of affairs in the churches of the Lowlands was very unsettled. There was no close contact between the churches of the Reformation and no complete set of regulations for ecclesiastical rule. The Synod of Emden, therefore, incorporated this article in the Church Order to keep fraudulent imposters from imposing themselves upon assemblies.

Credentials, of which the article speaks, are official letters of authorization of delegates. They are proof that the delegates have been sent by the consistories or the classes. They testify to the genuineness and the authority of the delegates. While in times of normalcy, when affairs are going smoothly in the church, they are a formality, they are a very important part of the official character of the meetings. They are, of course, sent only to classes and synods. The credential letters used in our churches follow a fixed form (cf. Church Order Book).

The credentials state that the delegates are authorized both to deliberate and to decide. This is not merely a right, but an obligation. The authorization pertains to all matters which are legally before the meeting and all matters transacted in agreement with Scripture, the confessions, and the Church Order. If these limitations are not observed, the delegates have no official authorization to take part.

To deliberate and decide implies that delegates, under normal circumstances, may not be instructed beforehand on how to vote on a given issue. This has sometimes been a problem which has been raised in the church. But if consistories instruct their delegates how to vote, the results are not good.

- 1) The authorization of the credentials becomes meaningless.
- 2) The broader assemblies lose their deliberative character.
- 3) There is no longer any room for being persuaded of a matter on the basis of the Word of God.

The only times when delegates are to be instructed how to vote are when an agenda from classis or synod reveals that illegal matters are coming to the assemblies or that matters contrary to the Word of God are to be deliberated upon. But even then the minor assemblies must make this clear to the major assemblies to whom the delegates are sent.

The credentials also make provision for instructions. These instructions are particular matters which a consistory or classis wishes to bring to the attention of the major assembly for deliberation. But these instructions must be brought in writing and must be signed by the president and the clerk of the body bringing them. Only then will the instructions be accurately and authentically presented.

The article limits the vote of the delegates to all matters coming before the assemblies “except such as particularly concern their persons and churches.” This rule is necessary for impartiality, fairness, and objectivity in decision. However, in our churches, where only two classes are represented on the synod, this rule would be difficult to enforce on the synodical level. If more classes were represented at synod, the rule would certainly apply. But in our churches one classis would alone decide on matters of another classis, with half the synod unable to vote. Hence the rule has been abandoned on the synodical level among us.

Finally, the footnote of the article makes provision for a stated clerk. Such a stated clerk does not have a vote on assembly meetings. He has no ecclesiastical power (as is the case in many denominations). He need not even be an officebearer, although often he is. He does only what he is authorized by the assembly to do. That is, he prepares a permanent record of the minutes. He takes care of correspondence assigned to him. He takes care of the archives. He prepares the agenda. (Cf. Church Order Book for rules governing the stated clerk at synod.)

ARTICLE 34

In all assemblies there shall be not only a president, but also a clerk to keep a faithful record of all important matters.

This article and the following one speak of the officers of the assemblies. It must be carefully observed that the term “officers” does not refer to “officebearers” and must not be confused with them. The officers of ecclesiastical assemblies are not of a superior rank among their fellow officebearers and they exercise no ecclesiastical authority within the assembly. They are functionaries of the assemblies who must see to it that the business is carried on in an orderly fashion. Their powers are limited by the Church Order and by the rules of the body. Their powers are not over an assembly but only within it and subject to it.

The article speaks of two officers. Formerly, provision was also made for an “assessor,” who was a vice-president. But this has been dropped. Nevertheless, the article does not forbid additional officers. The consistories usually have vice-presidents, clerks, assistant clerks, and committees, each with a chairman. While the officers themselves should be from the consistory, the committee need not necessarily be. An example is the building committee.

The classes usually have the two officers mentioned in the article. If the presiding officer needs to be replaced, another is provided for. Usually the officers at classis are appointed by alphabetical rotation.

Synod has, in addition to the officers mentioned in the article, a vice-president and a second clerk.

The article speaks briefly of the duties of the clerk: “to keep a faithful record of all important matters.” The clerk is therefore responsible to see to it that a complete enough record of the meeting is kept so that anyone may know what has been decided upon. This usually includes all motions duly made and supported, with the final decision taken, and all the official documents which are legally before the meeting and which must be recorded and entered into the records. This is usually done by means of supplements recorded in such a way that they are readily available and are clearly connected with the article which deals with them. No discussion or debate is included in the minutes unless the assembly decides otherwise.

The script minutes must be approved by the body itself. The final minutes are approved by the next meeting of the assembly. Only written and official minutes are legal and valid. Their accuracy and completeness is therefore very important.

ARTICLE 35

The office of the president is to state and explain the business to be transacted, to see to it that everyone observe due order in speaking, to silence the captious and those who are vehement in speaking; and properly to discipline them if they refuse to listen. Furthermore his office shall cease when the assembly arises.

This article originated with the Synod of Emden (1571), which synod referred it to the presidents of particular and general synods. In 1581 the Synod of Middelburg placed this article among the rules governing all assemblies and applied it to consistories and classes as well.

The article discusses the duties of presidents. It mentions the following:

- 1) “To state and explain the business to be transacted.” In some of our assemblies an agenda is prepared prior to the meeting and sent to all the delegates. This helps to make plain the business and gives the delegates opportunity to study it. But even with an agenda, this duty of the president remains, so that all matters may at all times be clearly understood. When there is no agenda the matter is especially important. All delegates must know what is being discussed and decided upon if they are to vote intelligently. The importance of this cannot be over-stressed. Especially when matters become somewhat involved or when the assembly is rapidly transacting routine business, there is real possibility of confusion unless the president exercises this duty.
- 2) “To see to it that everyone observe due order in speaking.” The pertinence of this rule is not a matter of politeness only, but recognizes the deliberative character of our assemblies. Everyone wishing to speak must have the opportunity. The fact that ecclesiastical matters are being discussed and that these matters are being discussed in an ecclesiastical manner adds weight to the importance of this. There are various rules of order adopted by our synod to assist the president in this work (cf. Church Order Book). And the vice-president must also assist the president when there are many seeking the floor.

The duty does not simply include giving everyone who desires an opportunity to speak. It means also that the president must guard against any one individual monopoliz-

ing the discussion. It implies that he must keep the discussion on the matter at hand and not permit the body to stray. It implies guiding the discussion so that the assembly arrives at a ripe decision. It implies that sufficient time must be given for discussion; yet when discussion becomes repetitious, it must be stopped.

The president also has the right to take part in the discussion. But he must then surrender his chair to the vice-president. This rule, however, is not usually observed in consistory meetings; nor need it be.

- 3) “To silence the captious and those who are vehement in speaking.” The “captious” are those who are sharp in their speech and hurt others with cutting language. The “vehement” are those who use violent language, speak in anger, and provoke others to anger.

When the article provides for properly disciplining these if they refuse to listen to the president’s admonition, the article does not refer to ecclesiastical discipline and exercise of the keys, which cannot be performed by a classis or synod, much less an officer of these assemblies. The reference is to reproof and admonition from the chair and, if necessary, debarment from further speaking. Usually it is enough when a president warns a delegate to watch more closely his speech. Sometimes it becomes necessary to stop a speaker in his speech and forbid him to speak further on the issue. And, on rare occasions, it may even be necessary for a president to ask for a formal motion of censure from the body itself.

The article states that the president’s office “shall cease when the assembly arises.” The president, as well as the clerk, functions only for the duration of the assembly meeting. The reasons are briefly:

- 1) The president is not a presiding officer of the churches met in assembly, but of the assembly alone.
- 2) His powers are limited to the assembly and he can function only within it.
- 3) The assembly itself ceases to exist when the meeting is adjourned. The exception to this is the consistory, which is composed of the officebearers of the church.

ARTICLE 36

The classis has the same jurisdiction over the consistory as the general synod has over the classis.

This article, in the form in which we have it, dates from the Synod of Middelburg, which was held in 1581. It is the key article in the Church Order dealing with the critical point of the relation between the various ecclesiastical assemblies: consistory, classis, and synod.

There have been serious differences of opinion within the Reformed churches concerning the meaning of the article. These differences hinge chiefly on the meaning of the word “jurisdiction.” This article and the meaning of the word “jurisdiction” were the key points in the history of our own churches (1924-1926), for they were used as support for the contention that a classis had power to depose a consistory.

There are different words used in different translations of the Church Order. Our English speaks of “jurisdiction,” which comes from the Latin: *jus* (law) and *dico* (I speak). Our English term, therefore, has legal connotations. The Dutch uses the word *zeggen*: “*t Zelfden zeggen heft de Classis over de Kerkeraad....*” This means, “the say”; i.e., “The Classis has the ‘say’ over the Consistory....” The Latin has *auctoritas*, which means “authority.”

From this semantic problem have arisen two views. The one view holds that the relation between the assemblies is one in which the major assemblies have only a certain “say” concerning matters in the minor assemblies. The danger of this view, however, is that the binding power of decisions is weakened. The federation becomes a very loosely knit organization of churches, and the sense of the Church Order is lost. It is true, of course, that major assemblies can only advise. But the Church Order insists upon the binding character of that advice. To deny this or weaken it leads in the direction of congregationalism on the denominational level.

On the other hand are those who emphasize the word “authority.” These insist that the relation is one which gives authority to major assemblies over minor assemblies. The danger is that this authority is interpreted to mean the authority which only consistories possess, as, e.g., the power of censure. Thus this view falls into the danger of giving the major assemblies an authority which destroys the autonomy of the local congregations.

The term “jurisdiction,” while not the best because of legal connotations, can nevertheless continue to be used if the correct idea is clearly understood. The word “authority” has the same dangers as “jurisdiction” and is, therefore, little improvement.

What, then, is the teaching of the article?

The article does not say: “The major assemblies have the same jurisdiction over the minor assemblies as the consistory has over the congregation.” It is important to notice this, lest the jurisdiction of the major assemblies be misconstrued. VanDellen and Monsma point out the following differences between the jurisdiction of a consistory over a congregation and the jurisdiction of a major assembly over a minor assembly:

- 1) A difference of origin. The major assemblies derive their authority from the consistories; the consistories from Christ.
- 2) A difference of necessity. The major assemblies are necessary for the *well-being* of the churches; the consistories for the *existence* of the churches.
- 3) A difference of essence. The major assemblies have derived an accidental jurisdiction. The consistories have original and essential jurisdiction.
- 4) A difference of duration. The jurisdiction of major assemblies ceases when the major assemblies adjourn. The consistories’ jurisdiction continues.
- 5) A difference of purpose. The major assemblies exist for the sake of particular churches; consistories do not exist for the sake of major assemblies but have independent existence.

The critical point is that the major assemblies have no power to preach, to administer the sacraments, and to exercise Christian discipline. In other words, they have no authority to engage in the *official* work of the church institute. Thus their jurisdiction is:

- 1) An authority which is rooted in the binding power of the Word of God and the Church Order.

2) An authority within the church connection.

3) An authority within their own prescribed sphere of activity (cf. Art. 30).

This position must be steadfastly maintained. The consequences are hierarchy in the church of Christ.

ARTICLE 37

In all churches there shall be a consistory composed of the ministers of the Word and the elders, who shall, as a rule, meet once a month, or more frequently as the need arises. The minister of the Word (or the ministers, if there be more than one, in turn) shall preside and regulate the proceedings. Whenever the number of the elders is small, the deacons may be added to the consistory by local regulation; this shall invariably be the rule where the number is less than three.

Decisions pertaining to Article 37

- A. The president and the secretary of the consistory shall function as such on the congregational meeting; the minutes shall be entered in the consistory's minute book and confirmed by the consistory.
- B. No matters shall be treated on the congregational meeting which are not brought there by the consistory.
- C. When members desire to have a matter treated on the congregational meeting, they shall previously have requested of the consistory the right thereto, and it shall be the prerogative of the consistory to determine the extent and the manner in which their request shall be granted.
- D. Consistories shall every year furnish the exact count of the families comprising their membership to classis. The following shall be counted as families:
 - 1. When the husband or wife is a confessing member.
 - 2. Where either widower or widow functions as head of the family.
 - 3. Further, three individual members shall be counted as one family. Confessing members residing at home are not tallied as separate individuals for determining number of families.
 - 4. Financial ability to pay does not enter into the picture when determining number of families.

(Adopted by Classis of June 6, 7, 1934; Synod of 1944, Arts. 66, 67; Synod of 1970, Art. 107, Suppl. XXVI.)

In speaking of the composition of the consistory, the article mentions two possibilities. Usually the consistory is composed of the minister(s) and the elders. But it is also possible that in smaller congregations the deacons be added. The article makes this an invariable rule where the number of elders is less than three.

The Synod of Emden, in 1571, stated quite generally "that in each church there should be gatherings or Consistories of ministers of the Word, elders, and deacons." But there were differences of opinion in the churches concerning the meaning of this: some consistories added the deacons, others did not. The matter was brought to the Synod of Dordt in 1574, which synod formulated our present article with the exception of the provision that deacons must be added where the number of elders is less than three.

The deacons do not properly belong to the consistory as such. The labors of elders and deacons differ according to the differences of their respective offices. Where they do not meet with the consistory, they hold their own separate meetings. However, there must even then be general meetings including the elders and the deacons because there are many matters of the church which must be decided upon in a joint meeting, since these matters concern both elders and deacons. (Cf. Articles 4, 5, 10, 13, 22, 24, 44, 81, etc. Cf. also the list in VanDellen and Monsma.)

If the deacons are added to the consistory in smaller congregations, they must function as elders. They have decisive vote in all matters and not merely advisory vote. This holds true of discipline cases as well as matters pertaining to the specific office of elders. But even in such cases it is well that, as much as possible, the offices be kept distinct. For example, the deacons should even then hold their own meetings. Committees appointed to visit the erring should be committees of elders if possible.

The article speaks also of the frequency of consistory meetings and stipulates that these meetings shall be once a week in larger congregations. This is not, however, a matter of principle but must be decided upon by general considerations concerning the well-being of the congregation. Even in the larger congregations in our churches the consistories meet twice a month. And the usual rule is once a month.

Other matters spoken of or implied in this article include:

- 1) If there is more than one minister in a congregation, the ministers shall preside over the consistory meetings in turn. This is to avoid all semblance of hierarchy and is in keeping with Article 17.
- 2) Consistory meetings must be announced, so that any member in the congregation may know when the meeting is, in order to bring any matter he may have to the consistory.
- 3) Consistory meetings must be closed meetings. There is sometimes question raised about this. Some contend that the congregation has the right to attend consistory meetings at any time. But this is not true. There are matters dealt with by the consistory which must be kept secret, such as matters of discipline and distribution of charity. Yet the consistory must keep the congregation informed as much as possible about matters which the congregation may know. And the individual members of the congregation are entitled to the decisions of the consistory. But if they desire these decisions they must come privately to get such information and they must have good reason for wanting it; not just curiosity.
- 4) The footnote of Article 37 speaks of congregational meetings. There are various regulations set forth:
 - a. The president and secretary of the consistory function also in that capacity at congregational meetings.
 - b. The minutes of the congregational meeting are entered into the consistory's minute book and confirmed by the consistory.
 - c. Matters treated by the congregation must first be brought to the consistory if they originate with a member of the congregation.

- d. Members have the right to bring matters to the congregational meetings, but only by bringing them first to the consistory. The consistory determines how and to what extent such matters shall come to the congregation.

The reasons for these rules are very important. The basic principles we have already discussed in the notes on Article 4. Here we add the fact that the congregation functions in the office of believers and exercises this office at the congregational meetings. But the rule of the congregation is through the consistory, for it is officially appointed by Christ to function in the offices. The decisions of a congregational meeting are binding upon the consistory. However, if a consistory learns of the wrongness of a decision, the matter must be brought to the congregation for reconsideration. Differences of opinion would have to be resolved by classis.

Finally, the article speaks of congregational statistics in the footnote. An exact count of families must be furnished annually to classis. This computation is according to an adopted rule. The purpose of this is to determine the synodical budget. Hence the statistics go on to synod. If classes had their own budgets, they would be used also on the classical level.

ARTICLE 38

In places where the consistory is to be constituted for the first time or anew, this shall not take place except with the advice of the classis.

Decisions pertaining to Article 38

- A. A letter of request is directed to the classis, expressing the desire to organize a congregation in a certain named locality, and signed by the heads of families or by adult single persons who live in that locality. In the case of a group formed by the mission work of the churches in common, this request shall come to classis by way of a favorable decision of the local calling church with the advice of the Mission Committee.
- B. The classis shall thereupon deliberate whether such organization is possible or desirable, observing whether there be, among the signators, persons suitable for consistory members, at the same time taking into account the neighboring churches. In case classis, with the concurrence of the delegates *ad examina*, decides to grant the request, it appoints a committee to carry out the organization.
- C. In order to organize the congregation the committee of the local church meets with the persons concerned, who have meanwhile requested their certificates of membership, or if it be impossible to have their certificates transferred, those present shall give testimony one of another that they were members in full communion and of good report in the congregation from which they are now separating. After a service of worship shall have been conducted under the guidance of the committee, the latter shall request those present to tender their certificates, in as far as possible. The committee having found the certificates in good order and having accepted them, they shall proceed to election of officebearers, who shall immediately upon their election be installed in their respective offices.
- D. The election of officebearers shall be from a nomination made by the local calling church council (or by the church council appointed by a classis to supervise the organization of a new congregation). The church council shall make a nomination from the male membership of those who signed the letter requesting organization. This election shall take place in harmony with Articles 22 and 24 of the Church Order. Those chosen by majority vote at the organizational meeting shall be considered elected.
- E. It is recommended that at this same meeting, in the presence of a notary public, the documents pertaining to the incorporation of the new congregation be brought in order.

(Adopted by the Classis of June 6, 7, 1934; Synod of 1944, Arts. 66, 67; Synod of 1977, Art. 74; Synod of 1994, Art. 54.)

Originally this article spoke of the reconstitution of consistories. The fact was that in the early history of the church in the Lowlands, congregations and consistories were scattered by persecution. The people of God were forced to flee their homes and often sought safety in foreign lands. When persecution subsided, these people would return to their homes and would desire to reconstitute their original consistory. This could not be done without the advice of classis. The article was changed in the Netherlands in 1905 and in our country in the revision of 1914 to include the element: "for the first time." Thus the article was made to refer to the organization of new churches. This organization of new churches takes place when congregations are gathered through mission work or church extension work. It can also take place when a congregation is born from a mother church. This article was also used in our own history in 1953 when most or all consistory members departed from the denomination, leaving a congregation without a consistory. These congregations were reconstituted.

It is important to notice that the article speaks not of the reconstituting of a congregation, but of a consistory. We speak of the organization of a congregation, but strictly speaking, this is not correct. The constituting of a consistory is the essential element in the organization of a congregation. Without the offices in the church, there can be no congregation as a manifestation of the body of Christ. However, with a consistory, a congregation must be organized as to membership.

The classis plays an important role in the formation of a consistory. The principle is clear and important. No classis or synod does or can organize a church. Nor does a congregation need the approval of a major assembly to organize a church. This is a function of the congregation itself. And only the congregation may and can do this work. The local congregation is, in itself, a complete manifestation of the body of Christ. Any other procedure would destroy this principle and introduce hierarchy into the church.

Nevertheless, the classis must play its role. Only the classis functioning in the name of the church federation has the right and the power to decide whether a certain congregation shall be organized as a part of the communion of churches. The group to be organized cannot decide this alone. Nor can a local congregation through its consistory within the federation take this upon itself. The right belongs to the churches together. The approval of the churches must be gained. This belongs first of all to the classis in which the congregation shall reside. But it belongs to the synod also when the credentials of the classis are accepted by synod.

There are, therefore, two ways in which new churches can be added to the federation. One is if an already organized congregation seeks admission to the federation. The other is if a group of believers seeks to be organized as a congregation within a federation.

The footnote adds various regulations concerning procedure. A couple of comments are in order. In the first place, the footnotes give the same power to the Mission Committee. This has sometimes led to confusion and conflict in our history. It would be better to abide by the article proper.

In the second place, the work is usually done under the supervision of a committee of classis or the Mission Committee. VanDellen and Monsma suggest that a consistory ought to be appointed to do this. This is a worthwhile suggestion, since the organization of a church is done with the preaching of the Word and the installation of officebearers. The appointed consistory could give an account of the work done to classis.

ARTICLE 39

Places where as yet no consistory can be constituted shall be placed under the care of a neighboring consistory.

Decision pertaining to Article 39

If possible the organization of a congregation shall precede the administration of the sacraments. However, if the conditions are not ripe for the organization of a congregation, such members are to be enrolled in an adjoining congregation, and thus the sacraments can be administered under the supervision of that consistory. However, this shall not be without the accompanying preaching of the Word, nor without sufficient representation of the consistory to have supervision of the administration.

(Adopted by the Classis of June 6, 7, 1934; Synod of 1944, Arts. 66, 67.)

This article, too, dates back to the Synod of Emden. The problem was a question of what must be done to gather believers in various localities where as yet there were no Reformed congregations. There were, here and there, small groups of individuals and sympathizers of the Reformation movement. Even secrecy was sometimes necessary because of persecution. Various synods concerned themselves with this problem and instructed classes to work through ministers and elders to take positive action to gather the church in these areas. The article in its present form was essentially adopted by the Synod of Dordt in 1618-'19. It is apparent, therefore, that this article came into existence in connection with church extension work or home missionary work. Our fathers saw, on the one hand, that it was not always possible to organize immediately a small group of believers. Yet, on the other hand, they did not want to neglect even the smallest group, even though organization was not yet possible.

Thus the article refers to groups of believers where no organization of a congregation is possible immediately. There may be other reasons than the smallness of numbers. It is possible that there is no adequate consistorial material in the group. It is also possible that a group needs further instruction in the Reformed faith before organization is advisable. Whatever the reason may be, the Church Order provides that such a group shall be placed under the care of a neighboring consistory. This consistory is then responsible to labor there. There are several matters implied in this "care" of a neighboring consistory.

- 1) The consistory must provide for the preaching, the administration of the sacraments, catechetical instruction, family visitation, etc.
- 2) The elders would have to work also exercising proper rule, supervising the preaching, visiting the sick, etc.
- 3) The deacons would also engage in their work, although by "consistory" is probably meant only the ministers and elders.

The article does not state who is responsible for implementing the article. Presumably, a consistory could take it upon itself to care for such a group of believers if it was made aware of their existence. However, normally the classis would determine whether the circumstances were of such a kind to warrant using this article; and would, if the article was implemented, appoint a consistory to be responsible for this labor.

The footnote also makes provision for these believers to become enrolled in the neighboring congregation which is responsible for their care.

ARTICLE 40

The deacons shall meet monthly, or more frequently as the need arises, to transact the business pertaining to their office, calling upon the name of God; whereunto the ministers shall take good heed, and if necessary they shall be present.

This article gradually developed into its present form. It was in 1574 that the Synod of Dordt decided that deacons should meet weekly. In 1586 it was added that they should “call upon the name of God.” In this same year the provision for ministerial supervision was also added. In 1905 and in 1914 the provision “wherever necessary” was added.

Deacons’ meetings are not mentioned in Article 29 as one of the ecclesiastical assemblies, but the Church Order, in the present article, requires such separate diaconal meetings nonetheless. This implies regular and official meetings, i.e., the deacons must not come together merely to discuss problems in an informal manner. “Meetings” means that the deacons schedule regular and official meetings in which various officers function and regular business is conducted in an official way. According to Article 37, deacons are sometimes added to the consistory. In such a situation it is not necessary for separate diaconal meetings to be held. The business of the deacons can be conducted on the joint consistory meeting. But should this be the case, the business of the deacons ought to be a regular item in the agenda of consistory meetings. The elders would then participate in the discussions and decisions. But even if it is not necessary for separate diaconal meetings when deacons are a part of the consistory, it would still be preferable, if at all possible, for deacons to hold separate meetings to discuss their own business.

The purpose of these meetings is “to transact the business pertaining to their office, calling upon the name of God.” All matters of finance are certainly not matters of business pertaining to the office of deacons, except in a very general way. While the deacons usually are responsible for all the paying of bills, this is not part of their official work. These matters could be handled by a committee of elders and deacons or a committee partially from the congregation and partly from the consistory. The official work of the deacons which pertains directly to their office is the work of mercy (cf. Arts. 25, 26 for a discussion of this).

The article includes the matter of calling on God’s name. This is not only part of the ecclesiastical manner which is required of all assemblies, but it is also necessary because the office of the deacons is profoundly spiritual, and supplication and intercession are necessary that the work may be carried on in faithfulness and may prosper under God’s blessing.

The article assigns the task of supervision to the ministers. The elders are also given this work (cf. Arts. 23, 25). In the implementing of Articles 23 and 25, an elder must always be present at deacons’ meetings. But this article also mentions the supervision of ministers. Vandellen and Monsma suggest that this stipulation has its origin in the past when deacons did much of their work under the supervision of the State. It was thought that ministerial supervision would prevent unnecessary and unwanted intrusion on the part of the State.

However this may be, Article 16 assigns to the minister the general work of supervision over his fellow officebearers. This article recognizes that fact. The minister must therefore be available for consultation and advice. He is the pastor of the congregation and knows most intimately the needs and circumstances and characteristics of the people of God in that place. His counsel must be sought when necessary. Usually the practice is that, while he is always available if needed, the minister takes his regular turn along with the rest of the elders in being present at diaconal meetings.

ARTICLE 41

The classical meetings shall consist of neighboring churches that respectively delegate, with proper credentials, a minister and an elder to meet at such time and place as was determined by the previous classical meeting. Such meetings shall be held at least once in three months, unless great distances render this inadvisable. In these meetings the ministers shall preside in rotation, or one shall be chosen to preside; however, the same minister shall not be chosen twice in succession.

Furthermore, the president shall, among other things, put the following questions to the delegates of each church:

- 1. Are the consistory meetings held in your church?*
- 2. Is church discipline exercised?*
- 3. Are the poor and the Christian schools cared for?*
- 4. Do you need the judgment and help of the classis for the proper government of your church?*

And finally, at the second to the last meeting and, if necessary, at the last meeting before the synod, delegates shall be chosen to attend said synod.

Article 41 deals with general rules for classical assemblies. At a very early date the Reformed churches organized themselves into classes. Already the Synod of Emden urged the churches to do this, and this urging was soon to have its effect. The article as we now have it is essentially the work of the Synod of Middelburg held in 1581. Only minor changes have been made over the years.

There are several rules of a general kind specified in this article.

- 1) In the first place, the article speaks of the constituency of classis. Classis is to consist of “neighboring churches.” This refers to churches of one geographical region. This is because of the purpose for which classes are organized. They are intended to deal with problems unique to the churches of a given geographical area. This was much more pertinent in the Netherlands, which was divided into provinces, and it was more pertinent to distant times when travel was difficult and communication between churches less than easy. But the purpose is still of validity today. Besides, classes are very important to facilitate the work of the federation of churches.

The boundaries of classes are, therefore, to be fixed. While it is usually best to attempt to keep the classes balanced as to size, this must not be a hard and fast rule.

Each church is represented at classis by two delegates, the names of which are included on the credentials.

- 2) In the second place, the article speaks of the time and place of meetings. This is decided by the previous classis. Although our churches follow definite dates for classical meetings, each date is decided by classical decision.

Announcements must be made concerning the time and place. This is done in our churches by a stated clerk. In the Netherlands it is done by a calling church appointed by the previous classis. Preferably, the place of meeting should vary from one congregation to another.

- 3) Thirdly, the article discusses the frequency of meetings. The general rule is once every three months or four times a year. The article allows for exceptions in cases of great distance. Our Classis East meets three times a year; but our Classis West meets twice a year. With modern means of transportation, distance is no longer a factor. But the matter of cost is taken into account in the West. Provisions should be made for special meetings of classis if the classis holds scheduled meetings only twice a year.
- 4) Fourthly, the article speaks of the presidency. The presidency may be determined either by election or by rotation. Both of our classes follow the method of rotation; although this is a matter of practical wisdom. The same is true of the rule that only ministers may function as presidents. This is not a principle matter. The ministers do not occupy a superior office. It is a matter of practical wisdom and recognizes the fact that usually ministers are better equipped to lead meetings. The article forbids the same minister to preside at successive meetings.
- 5) Fifthly, the article speaks of questions which must be asked the delegates of each congregation by the president. The purpose of these questions must be clearly understood. They must not become an opportunity for one congregation to lord it over another or for a classis to usurp the authority of its respective congregations. Rather, the idea is that, within the federation of churches, where autonomous congregations labor together in a common cause and in a unity of faith, there must be some mutual supervision. This supervision is necessary to ascertain whether the various churches are walking according to the principles of the federation of which they are a part. The questions are formulated with this in mind. It is important to notice that the questions all have to do with the labors of the officebearers in their respective office.

The questions are self-explanatory except that there has been some questions about the last one: "Do you need the judgment and help of the classis for the proper government of your church?" This question is not intended to be an invitation to each consistory to bring all its problems to the classis. The congregations are autonomous. Each consistory is obligated to solve its own problems in the light of the Word of God. But the question has to do with matters which might *help* the consistory in the proper government of the church. This government may not be taken from the consistory. Usually this request would then concern questions of procedure or questions pertaining to a correct understanding of the Church Order. These questions ought not to originate with the delegates unless the delegates believe that the help of the classis might be needed to implement a decision of the classis which pertains to their congregation. The questions ought rather to originate in the consistory and be brought to classis by the delegates. The ques-

tion ought then to be answered by decision and not by general discussion. The latter is sometimes done.

While in our classical meetings these questions are usually asked at the end of the meeting, the Reformed churches have often asked these questions at the beginning. There seems to be much in favor of the latter. Problems of the federation itself ought to have the precedence at a classical meeting; for, except they be solved, other work is difficult if not impossible.

- 6) Finally, the article mentions a few items of business. It is implied that the business of the classis will be the business defined in Articles 30 and 31 of the Church Order. But, besides, at the last or next to the last meeting before synod, delegates must be chosen.

ARTICLE 42

Where in a church there are more ministers than one, also those not delegated according to the foregoing article shall have the right to attend classis with advisory vote.

The Synod of Dordt held in 1578 ruled that each congregation must be represented at classis by one minister and one elder. Other ministers in a congregation received advisory vote. Various overtures were brought to different synods from time to time which attempted to have this changed. Finally, the Synod of Dordt held in 1618-1619 did change the rule and gave to all ministers of a congregation decisive vote. But the practice which had originated in 1578 was reinstated in 1905 and was adopted in this country in 1914.

While we do not face the problem at present in our churches except in connection with the professors, there are important issues at stake. On the one hand, those who favored giving every minister a vote pointed to the obvious inequality of voting. In our churches there are great differences in size. This is more true in the Netherlands, where several churches belong to the same congregation and where several ministers work in one congregation. Congregations can number in excess of 4,000 families. It is therefore argued that justice and fairness require that the principle of "one man, one vote" which is followed in civil affairs be applied also to the church.

On the other side of the picture, however, is the argument that if larger congregations receive more votes than smaller ones, the larger ones would consistently out-vote the smaller ones and, in effect, rule the affairs of the church.

There are indeed practical arguments which can be raised on each side of the problem. But the matter ought not to be decided on the basis of practical considerations. There are principle matters at issue. We have already referred briefly to them in the last article. In the first place, every congregation, whether large or small, is a complete manifestation of the body of Christ. Hence, all the churches stand on a par with each other as to rights and authority. This ought to be expressed in matters of voting within the federation. In the second place, in connection with Article 30, we noticed that the ecclesiastical manner referred to in that article is not mere voting power. While this is the case in secular affairs, it is not proper procedure in the church of Christ. The assemblies are deliberative and are united in the common calling of seeking the welfare of

the cause of Christ. The regulatory power in the church is the authority of the Word of God. All must bow before that Word.

These principles are recognized by the Church Order. On the one hand, each congregation is given but two votes. And, on the other hand, advisory votes are given to additional ministers so that they can participate in the deliberations but have no decisive vote. If parliamentary maneuvering and mere voting power are ever the means by which issues are decided in the church of Christ, the church is hopelessly lost to begin with. Nothing else makes a great deal of difference.

ARTICLE 43

At the close of the classical and other major assemblies, censure shall be exercised over those who in the meeting have done something worthy of punishment, or who have scorned the admonition of the minor assemblies.

This article was included in the Church Order because in the early history of the Reformed churches there were many delegates whose conduct was not appropriate to the assemblies and who violated the spirit of the ecclesiastical manner spoken of in Article 30. The article speaks of this matter of censure as being a part of the regular agenda at major assemblies. Today this is not done, and, in fact, the article is seldom invoked, simply because there is seldom a need for it. Yet, if it becomes necessary, the censure of Article 43 may be applied.

The censure spoken of here differs from the censure mentioned in Article 35, which speaks of the president's obligations in the course of deliberations and debate. It differs, too, from the articles dealing specifically with Christian discipline. And it differs from the *censura morum* exercised in the consistories according to Article 81.

Two classes of people are deemed by the article to be worthy of such censure. The first class is composed of those "who in the meeting have done something worthy of punishment." This would refer to one who violated the principles of Christian ethics either in his speech or conduct on the assembly. It need not necessarily refer to one of the delegates. It may also refer to an appellant who is present at the meeting to defend his case. But the article presupposes that by such a breach of ethics an offense has been made which must be removed before the meeting adjourns.

The second class referred to are those who "have scorned the admonition of the minor assemblies." The reference is to delegates, consistories, or other individuals involved in ecclesiastical deliberations. These may "scorn" the decisions of "minor" assemblies on major assemblies, or they may show scorn for the decisions of the assemblies on which they appear and at which assemblies decisions on their "cases" are taken. Their error is not that they disagree with a decision. The right to disagree is guaranteed by Article 31. But they scorn these decisions or admonitions. They despise them and hold them in open contempt, they are plainly rebellious against them and show their unwillingness to bow before the Word of God. These must be censured.

Although the procedure is not spelled out in the Church Order, apparently a formal procedure is implied. A formal complaint is entered by a member of the assembly. A decision is taken by the assembly to admonish and censure such an individual. A formal admonition is made to the

individual, through the chair, to remove the offense. Quite naturally, if the offense is not removed, the consistory of the individual must be informed so that proper ecclesiastical discipline may be exercised.

ARTICLE 44

The classis shall authorize at least two of her oldest, most experienced, and most competent ministers to visit all the churches once a year and to take heed whether the minister and the consistory faithfully perform the duties of their office, adhere to sound doctrine, observe in all things the adopted order, and properly promote as much as lies in them, through word and deed, the upbuilding of the congregation, in particular of the youth, to the end that they may in time fraternally admonish those who have in anything been negligent, and may by their advice and assistance help direct all things unto the peace, upbuilding, and greatest profit of the churches. And each classis may continue these visitors in service as long as it sees fit, except where the visitors themselves request to be released for reasons of which the classis shall judge.

Decisions pertaining to Article 44

Church visitation, which is required to be done in the congregations, requires for its efficient prosecution the following:

- A. Each classis shall appoint from her midst at least two ministers and their alternates.
- B. The visitors shall give the congregations at least eight days' notice of the day and hour of their proposed visit.
- C. The consistory shall see to it that all the consistory members are present at the meeting which is appointed for church visitation. Any member failing to be present shall be required to give the meeting good reason for his absence. If one-half of the members are absent, the visitation cannot be carried out.
- D. The consistory shall see to it that the record books are at hand for the inspection by the visitors.
- E. Of the visitors, one shall function as chairman and the other as secretary. They shall record their findings and actions in a book which can be consulted at the next visitation, and which can be kept in the classical archives.
- F. After completing the visitation of all the congregations, the visitors shall with requisite discretion compose a report of their activities to be delivered at the next following classis.

(Adopted by Classis of June 6, 7, 1934; Synod of 1944, Arts. 66, 67.) (Cf. Questions for Church Visitation, pp. 111-114.)

This article, dealing with church visitation, was not originally included in the Church Order. The Reformed churches did not immediately accept the idea of church visitation, out of fear that the practice would lead to a hierarchical domination of the classis over a consistory. Besides, in earlier days, classical meetings were held oftener, sometimes as often as once a month. The provisions of this article were considered unnecessary.

However, several classes, on their own, instituted the practice and overtured general synods to adopt the custom throughout the churches. Some synods refused. Others ('s Gravenhage, 1586) recommended the practice. Finally Dordt in 1618-1619 made it imperative. This was probably in part due to the turmoil created by the Arminian controversy.

If the proper character of church visitation is not understood and maintained, the dangers of hierarchy are indeed real. It is always possible that the result of church visitation could be interference on the part of a classis in the internal affairs of an autonomous congregation. The danger must be guarded against lest a higher rule be imposed on a congregation. Yet, fear of the dangers ought not to result in an under-evaluation of the work, and consistories ought to guard against resisting the work of the classical delegates. The solution to the problem is to maintain the proper role of church visitation. This role is essentially that of mutual supervision within the church federation. This idea of mutual supervision is not only a matter which lies at the very heart of church federation; it is a point strongly urged by the Church Order (cf. Art. 41). By such mutual supervision there will be mutual benefits for the churches, benefits which the individual churches expect to receive from their place within the denomination because they labor in a mutual endeavor on behalf of the cause of Christ. If these points are kept in mind, there will be no danger of hierarchical interference on the part of the classis, nor will the visitation become mere routine.

The article stipulates that the work shall be carried out by classical authorization of “at least two of her oldest, most experienced, and most competent ministers.” Although there is no principle wrong in elders doing the work, ministers are stipulated because, generally, they are better qualified in the affairs of the church as a whole. There must be at least two. More may be added if classis desires, but two constitute an official committee. They must be of the oldest, most experienced, and most competent because a great deal of wisdom is required to do this work: to ask the right questions; to maintain the proper character of the work; to give proper advice and counsel in a proper way; and to aid the congregation as best they can.

The meetings must be announced on the bulletin in the church so that members in the congregation may also come if they deem this necessary. According to the article, attention must be paid to the following matters:

- 1) Whether the minister and the consistory faithfully perform the duties of their office, adhere to sound doctrine, and observe proper order in the church.
- 2) Whether the officebearers promote the upbuilding of the congregation, especially the youth.
- 3) Admonition to those negligent in their work.
- 4) Advice and assistance so that all things are directed to the peace, upbuilding, and greatest profit of the churches.

In the footnote to the article and in the questions adopted for use (cf. Church Order Book), various other matters are more definitely touched upon. But the questions must not be routinely asked and mechanically answered. There must be freedom to discuss related and other matters. Yet some matters are not the proper domain of the church visitors. These include cases pending with the consistory, cases not yet treated by the consistory, matters properly belonging to the consistory. It is evident why wisdom and discretion are required.

Various other regulations include:

- 1) Church visitors must be chosen anew each year, although they may be reappointed.
- 2) Records of the work must be kept in a permanent record book so that church visitors may become acquainted with perennial problems in a congregation.

- 3) A report must be made to classis so that classis knows of the work being done. The report must be made with proper discretion.
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ARTICLE 45

It shall be the duty of the classis and the general synod to furnish the following meeting with the minutes of the preceding.

This article, relating to the care of the archives of major ecclesiastical assemblies, was first adopted by the Synod of Dordt in 1578, but was applied only to the acts of the synods. In 1581 the Synod of Middelburg made this applicable also to the classes.

The article once made provision for the calling church to furnish the meetings of classes or synods with the minutes of the preceding meeting of that particular body. This is the way it is done in the Netherlands. One congregation is appointed to be responsible for the preservation of all the archives. The calling church is responsible for providing the minutes of a preceding meeting. There were especially two reasons for this provision.

- 1) The churches feared giving any individual in the church a permanent office because such a position might lead to unwarranted power in the individual and introduce hierarchy in the church.
- 2) Printing was costly and the minutes were not widely published.

A congregation was appointed to make them available.

We have made provision for stated clerks to take care of this work both on the synodical and classical level (cf. Art. 33, footnote). The stated clerk keeps all the archives, makes them available to subsequent meetings, and carries out other secretarial tasks assigned to him. This is done chiefly because it is more efficient than the method used in the past. The dangers of hierarchy can be avoided if no work of an ecclesiastical nature is assigned to a stated clerk and if care is taken that the clerk does nothing but what is given him to perform.

The reason why provision for this is made in the Church Order is that the broader assemblies are not continuing bodies. And because they are not continuing bodies, some provision must be made for the preservation of the archives, so that these archives are available to subsequent assemblies. They must be available for various reasons. It must be ascertained whether decisions have been carried out. Old and related decisions must be consulted before new ones are taken (cf. Art. 46). And other reasons.

The archives must be kept safely not only because they are of historic importance, but also because they are the official records of assemblies. We have the practice of publishing the minutes of synod in a printed *Acts*. This is not usually done with the classical minutes. The proceedings of the classes are brought back to the respective consistories by the delegates in an oral fashion. This is done from memory and hastily scrawled notes. It might be advisable to consider the official publication of the minutes of classis as well as synod.

ARTICLE 46

Instructions concerning matters to be considered in major assemblies shall not be written until the decisions of previous synods touching these matters have been read, in order that what was once decided be not again proposed, unless a revision be deemed necessary.

This article concerning the reading of previous decisions is closely connected with Article 45. It was first decided upon at the Synod of Emden in 1571. Its occasion was the fact that minutes of ecclesiastical assemblies were not widely published; that matters were being brought to the assemblies which had previously been decided upon; that this led to duplication, conflicting and contradictory decisions.

Hence it was decided that decisions of synods had to be read at classes before matters were sent on to synod. But gradually the literal requirement of the article fell into disuse. This was because reading the decisions became a difficult and time-consuming task as the number of decisions grew. And the publication of synodical decisions made the requirement less necessary. We no longer follow this literal stipulation.

The general idea of the article is still important. The article concerns itself with overtures from consistories to classes or from classes to synods. While not specifically mentioned, the same general principles would hold also for matters of appeal. An overture is a request on the part of a minor assembly to a major assembly to take some positive action on a matter within the jurisdiction of a major assembly. These overtures may originate with an individual, a consistory, or a classis. They go to broader assemblies via the minor assemblies. Each minor assembly ought also to consider its value and come to a formal decision on it. This is quite important. Perhaps a consistory overturing synod concerning a certain matter is dissuaded from bringing its request to synod because of cogent arguments raised on the classis. However, anyone originating an overture has the right to bring an overture to the assembly involved with or without the approval of the minor assemblies.

The point of the article is, however, that no matter ought to be brought to major assemblies without consulting earlier decisions. The chief responsibility for observing this rule rests upon the one originating the overture. But any assembly ought to check on former decisions if this proves necessary. The purpose is that there may be no duplication or contradiction of decisions formerly taken. Previous decisions must be consulted for all the light they are able to shed upon the matter. Not only ought decisions directly relating to the matter of overture be consulted, but also related decisions.

The article does not, however, forbid alteration of past decisions. It explicitly states: "...unless a revision be deemed necessary." Past decisions are not perfect. Time and circumstances sometimes alter their importance and relevance. But they must be consulted.

The article implicitly recognizes the value of the history of the church and the importance of the guidance of the Spirit of Christ in the church. When the church has decided something in the past, it did so with good reason. We must not presumptuously think we have new problems and greater wisdom, so that past decisions need not even be considered.

ARTICLES 47-49

47. (Every year [or if need be oftener] four or five or more neighboring classes shall meet as a particular synod, to which each classis shall delegate two ministers and two elders. At the close of both the particular and the general synod, some church shall be empowered to determine, with advice of classis, the time and place of the next synod.)

48. (Each synod shall be at liberty to solicit and hold correspondence with its neighboring synod or synods in such manner as they shall judge most conducive to general edification.)

49. Each synod shall delegate some to execute everything ordained by synod, both as to what pertains to the government and to the respective classes resorting under it, and likewise to supervise together or in smaller number all examinations of future ministers. And, moreover, in all other eventual difficulties they shall extend help to the classes in order that proper unity, order, and soundness of doctrine may be maintained and established. Also they shall keep proper record of all their actions to report thereof to synod, and, if it be demanded, give reasons. They shall also not be discharged from their service before and until synod itself discharges them.

We shall only briefly touch upon these articles because they deal with the matter of particular synods, which we do not have in our churches.

Article 47 speaks of a rule applying to our general synod. It is the rule of an annual meeting. If particular synods were held in our churches, the general synod would meet only every two years. Also, our general synod is called into session by a calling church. The date of meeting and the calling church is decided upon by the previous synodical meeting. The calling church decided the meeting place, announces the meeting, makes provision for the lodging of delegates, is responsible for the pre-synodical prayer service, and provides for other material necessities of the meeting (cf. for details on rules the Rules of Order for Synod in the Church Order Book).

Article 48 does not apply at all when it speaks of correspondence with neighboring synods, although the rule could conceivably be applied to our classes.

Article 49 speaks of “delegating some to execute everything ordained by synod.” This article empowers the general synod also to appoint committees to carry out various aspects of the work of the churches. A listing of these committees with their rules and constitutions are to be found in the back of the Church Order.

It must be remembered that these committees are not in any respect autonomous. They may function only with a specific mandate from the synod and are instructed to report to synod. Synodical delegates for examination are also appointed under the provisions of this article.

ARTICLE 50

The general synod shall ordinarily meet annually. To this synod an equal number of elders and ministers out of every classis shall be delegated as determined by synod. If it becomes necessary in the opinion of at least two classes to call a special meeting of synod, the local church designated for this purpose shall determine time and place.

The synod of our churches meets annually. There are several reasons for this.

- 1) We do not have provincial or particular synods.
- 2) Meetings every two years would result in large backlogs of work. This in turn would mean lengthy synodical sessions and the danger of hasty work.
- 3) Important work would be delayed in some cases.
- 4) Too much power could be given to synodical committees.

Our rules, therefore, require meeting every year.

For detailed rules concerning the convening of synod, confer “Rules of Order of Synod.” These rules stipulate that synod shall be convened on the second Tuesday of June; that the actual calling of synod and the provision for a meeting place are left to the calling consistory; that synod may recess only within the calendar year in which it meets: that after the end of the year a new synod must be called. The convening of an early synod is also covered by the rules.

The article speaks of delegates to synod. It stipulates that the number of delegates shall be six from each classis. Because we have only two classes, we have ten from each classis — five ministers and five elders. Article 4 of the Rules of Synod also gives advisory vote to various men.

How the delegates to synod are to be chosen is not defined in the Church Order. Some have favored a rotation system in the classis in order that all may have opportunity to attend. While there is nothing principally wrong with this method, it is probably advisable to follow the method of election in order that those who are best qualified may be sent. Consistories should send to the classis nominations for elder delegates, so that men who are able to attend synod are sent. This rule is followed in Classis West.

ARTICLE 51

The missionary work of the churches is regulated by the general synod in a mission order.

We must briefly turn to the history of this article. In its original form the article dealt with quite a different matter. It spoke of the need of two groups of ecclesiastical assemblies between the Dutch Reformed Churches and the French Reformed Churches because they spoke different languages. These two groups of ecclesiastical assemblies were to be maintained on the classical and particular synod level. Only the general synod was to be a combined meeting. But the arti-

cle became a historical anachronism. The change to the present article was made in 1914 by the Christian Reformed Church. Our churches changed the word “church” to “churches” when the present Church Order was adopted by us.

The present article speaks of the regulation of missionary work. In the Christian Reformed Church this article was intended to cover missionary work among the heathen and the Jews. The work of home missions was under the regulation of the classes. But the Christian Reformed Church also adopted a Home Missions Order, although (according to VanDellen and Monsma) not on the basis of this article. In our churches all mission work is under the regulation of synod. This includes church extension work, home missions, and foreign missions (cf. the Constitution of the Mission Committee). But this does not exclude mission work either by local consistories or classes. However, they must not labor independently of the rest of the churches, and they must labor within the established order of the churches in common.

When the article speaks of regulation of mission work, it does not mean that synod actually performs the work. The actual work must be done by local churches or by a local church. Synod is given the power to regulate the work, to oversee it, and to see that it is carried out. This is a fundamental principle of Reformed church polity. No major assembly may perform the actual work of the ministry of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, or the exercise of Christian discipline. Nor may any major assembly call and send a missionary. All this belongs to the local congregation. It is, in the words of the article, mission work “of the churches.”

But the churches labor together in this respect. The work is of mutual concern. It is an expression of their mutual calling in the unity of the church of Christ. It is, from a practical point of view, easier to do the work together since many local congregations lack the means.

ARTICLE 52

When different languages are spoken in the churches, the necessary translations shall be made in the ecclesiastical assemblies and in the publication of recommendations, instructions, and decisions.

This article, too, was of an entirely different nature in the original Church Order. As we noticed, Article 51 dealt with the language question — the difference in languages that existed between the churches of the Northern Lowlands, which spoke Dutch, and the Southern Lowlands, which spoke French or Walloon. The article, in recognition of this, required separate ecclesiastical assemblies on all levels except the level of synod. Article 52 recognized the possibility that, since the assemblies were meeting separately, the churches might drift apart. Hence this article spoke of some cooperation between Dutch and French churches within the same city and made provision for combined consistory meetings on a regular basis.

But Article 52 became unnecessary in time and the article was altered in 1905 to regulate the relation between the churches in the Netherlands and Indonesia.

Our present article was inserted by the Christian Reformed Church in 1914, when both the English and the Dutch language were used.

The article is now out of date. The Americanization of the churches is complete, so that the Dutch language is hardly ever spoken. Even the immigrant problem is not a great one. The article is therefore of no practical use any longer. Nor does it seem likely that it will be of use in the future.

Of Doctrine and Sacraments

ARTICLES 53, 54

53. The ministers of the Word of God and likewise the professors of theology (which also behooves the other professors and school teachers) shall subscribe to the three formulas of unity, namely, the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordrecht, 1618-'19, and the ministers of the Word who refuse to do so shall de facto be suspended from their office by the consistory or classis until they shall have given a full statement, and if they obstinately persist in refusing, they shall be deposed from their office.

Decision pertaining to Article 53

The formula for subscription for ministers, etc., shall be transcribed in the minute books of both consistory and classis.

(Adopted by Classis of June 6, 7, 1934; Synod of 1944, Arts. 66, 67.) (Cf. Formula of Subscription, pp. 114, 115.)

54. Likewise the elders and deacons shall subscribe to the aforesaid formulas of unity.

With this article, the Church Order begins a new section, which deals with "Doctrine, Sacraments, and other Ceremonies." This section covers Articles 53-70. Articles 53 and 54 deal with the signing of the Formula of Subscription. (This Formula should be read and studied in connection with these articles. It can be found in the Church Order Book.)

We have noticed before (cf. notes on Arts. 29-31) that the principle of church federation is the principle of the unity of the body of Christ. This unity of the church is the unity of Christ Himself, in whom all the church is united. It is a unity brought about by the Spirit of Christ, who dwells in all the members of the church. But this unity must come to expression in the life of the church. And it comes to expression in "one faith, one hope, one calling," etc. (cf. Eph. 4:1-13). This section of the Church Order deals with these principles of unity and speaks particularly of the unity of the church federation in doctrine, in sacraments, and in liturgy. Most basic of all is the unity of doctrine. It is this point which the Church Order treats first. This is basic because the unity of the church is the unity of Christ; and Christ is the fullness of the revelation of God. Upon this unity of doctrine rests the unity of the observance of the sacraments and other ceremonies. Without doctrinal unity, all other unity is impossible.

This doctrinal unity is expressed in the confessions of the church. These confessions are expressions of the faith of the believers, that which believers confess as the truth of the Word of God. Hence these confessions are Formulas of Unity.

This unity of the church must be actively sought and maintained. Hence the Church Order makes provision for the signing of the Formula of Subscription.

Very early in the history of the churches of the Reformation, confessions were drawn up expressing this doctrinal unity. There was, at that time, no Formula of Subscription. Officebearers were required to sign the confessions themselves as expressions of their agreement. But the need for some form was soon felt. Various classes and provincial synods formulated their own forms. This was especially true during the years of the Arminian controversy. The Synod of Dordrecht in 1618-19 adopted our present form, which has come down to us almost unchanged. A change was made by the Hervormde Kerk (State Church) prior to the Afscheiding; but the Afgescheidende Kerken returned again to the old form.

Various promises are made by the officebearers who sign the Form.

- 1) Basically, the Form is a declaration of agreement with our Reformed confessions and with the doctrines contained in them. Those who sign express that they believe these confessions contain the truth of the Word of God.
- 2) Further, a promise is made actively to teach and to defend these doctrines.
- 3) Negatively, the promise is made to reject all heresies opposed to these doctrines of the confessions. Those who sign may not directly or indirectly contradict them. They may not do this either in public preaching or in writing. But they must not simply reject error. They must also militate against error, refuting and contradicting all heresy. They must exert themselves to keep the church free from doctrinal error. All this applied particularly to the errors of Arminianism condemned by the Synod of Dordt. But the promise is applicable to every evil of false doctrine.
- 4) Further, the promise is made to be honest and upright before the churches in all matters of doctrine. If one has any questions in his mind concerning the doctrines of the confessions, he promises not to propose or teach or defend these differences. He promises that he will not do this either in public or in private. He promises that he will keep silent both in his preaching and in his writing.

This uprightness which one who signs the Formula promises deals also with the procedure to be followed in making known any differences he may have. In general, such a one must follow the ecclesiastical way in revealing these differences. Particularly this means two things. On the one hand, it means that any differences with the confessions must be revealed to the consistory, classis, and synod. While this process is being followed, the one making his appeal must keep silent. And, when assemblies reach their decisions, he must abide by the judgment of the assemblies. On the other hand, he promises to submit to an official examination concerning his views if at any time assemblies think that there is sufficient ground of suspicion concerning his teaching and preaching.

The article (and the Formula) speaks also of the penalty attached to any violation of these promises. This penalty is *de facto* suspension from office. This penalty, it must be observed, is part of the promise which an officebearer makes. It is in this light also that this “*de facto* suspension” must be understood. The idea is that an officebearer who breaks his promise suspends

himself from office by his failure to abide by his promise. The assemblies themselves merely declare that he has done this. This is the point of the language of Article 53: “shall *de facto* (by the fact) be suspended from ... office by the consistory or *classis*.” A *classis* cannot suspend from office. This is a power reserved for the consistory as part of the exercise of the keys of the kingdom. Hence a *classis* merely declares a suspension already done by the violation of a promise made.

Nevertheless, the rights of such an officebearer are always guarded. He has the right of appeal in any judgment rendered. But during his appeal he must submit to the decisions taken and to his own promises. No officebearer may go his own way within the federation of churches because the unity of the church must be preserved.

The following, according to Articles 53 and 54, must sign:

- 1) All ministers, elders, and deacons. The footnote speaks of the fact that the Formula for ministers shall be transcribed in the minute books of both consistory and *classis*.
- 2) All professors of theology. This provision does not apply particularly to our professors. They are all ministers and sign the Formula as ministers. There is no need of a separate signing prior to their installation as professors.
- 3) Other professors and Christian school teachers. This rule is not followed in our churches. It came into effect in the Netherlands, where the schools were operated by the government under the supervision of the churches (cf. Art. 21). There are some arguments which can be raised in favor of this practice. However, there are two serious objections. The first is that the Formula of Subscription in its present form could not be used because of the fact that for teachers there can be no *de facto* suspension from office. Secondly, the Formula is ecclesiastical. Teachers are not, as teachers, under the supervision of consistories, but under the supervision of school societies. We do not believe that church-controlled schools are in harmony with Scripture.

The Formula must be signed at the consistory. Newly installed officebearers are to sign the Formula prior to their installation. If they have signed the Formula once, they need not sign again unless they should move to another congregation and be chosen for office in their new church home. Ministers must sign the Formula when they are installed in a new congregation even though they have signed it before. This is chiefly for practical reasons: each consistory which they serve must have its own record of his signature.

The Formula must also be signed at *classis* by all officebearers attending. Here too, they need sign it only once, even though they may be delegated again to a subsequent classical meeting.

The Formula is not signed at synod. The delegates sent to synod express their agreement with the confessions through rising in assent to the Public Declaration of Agreement (cf. pp. 73, 74).

ARTICLE 55

To ward off false doctrines and errors that multiply exceedingly through heretical writings, the ministers and elders shall use the means of teaching, of refu-

tation or warning, and of admonition, as well in the ministry of the Word as in Christian teaching and family-visiting.

This article has a long history. In its present form it is almost a complete revision of the original article. The only similarity between the original and the present article is that both deal with heretical writings.

Prior to 1586 various synods made rules concerning the publication of books, pamphlets, and articles. Such writings could not be published without the approval of the ministers of one's classis, the ministers of one's particular synod, or the professors of theology. This rule was not only applicable to those within the Reformed churches; it applied to all in the realm. This was done in the hopes that the government would make this law enforceable and thus promote the Reformed religion.

In 1586 the churches made the rule applicable only to those who belonged to the Reformed churches, since the government did not always do as the churches hoped. This ruling was confirmed by the Synod of Dordrecht. But in 1618 the government itself adopted a less stringent rule and made the rule of the church ineffectual. Even this less stringent rule proved to be totally impractical and incapable of enforcement. In 1905 the present revision was adopted in the Netherlands, and in 1914 the Christian Reformed Church adopted the same article.

The reasons why former rules did not work are evident. The rules were legalistic and did not give authors and readers the right of proper exercise of Christian liberty. They could never be enforced upon readers; curiosity was often aroused by the mere fact that a book was banned. The rules were historically in the tradition of Roman Catholicism and Romish hierarchy. Today no such rule would ever work.

The present article speaks of the need for warning against false doctrine. Particularly, the article speaks of errors which multiply through writings. The article has both a negative and a positive aspect. Negatively, error must be refuted. This aspect of the article is often criticized in our day. In an age of tolerance, refutation of heresy is considered impolite and out of keeping with the temper of the times. Nevertheless, it is highly important, must be observed, and is in keeping with the example of Scripture itself. Positively, the article enjoins ministers and elders to expound, teach, preach, and proclaim the truth.

This must be done through teaching, refutation of error, warning, and admonition. It must be done in the ministry of the Word, in Christian teaching, and in family visitation.

While the article refers especially to readers, i.e., to those who read writings containing heresies, authors are covered by the Formula of Subscription if they are officebearers and by the general rules of discipline if they are not officebearers.

By way of footnote to the last three articles, we cannot refrain from a note emphasizing the importance of this part of the Church Order. We live in an age of doctrinal tolerance and indifference. In many churches, even of Reformed persuasion, the Formula of Subscription is signed by officebearers who hold mental reservations when they sign, who sign with tongue in cheek, who have no intention of observing the promises made. The churches tolerate breach of promise with unbelievable ennui. The result is doctrinal confusion and apostasy. Faithful officebearers

do well to read and re-read these articles and observe them carefully. They are for the preservation of the church of Christ in the world.

ARTICLE 56

The covenant of God shall be sealed unto the children of Christians by baptism, as soon as the administration thereof is feasible, in the public assembly when the Word of God is preached.

Decision pertaining to Article 56

Adopted children shall be baptized only when their legal adoption shall have been made final.
(Adopted by the Synod of 1960, Art. 24.)

Articles 56 through 60 speak of the sacrament of baptism. In the present article, the Church Order speaks of two matters: 1) who shall be baptized; 2) when baptism shall take place.

In answer to the first question, the article speaks of “the children of Christians.” The word “Christians” is a very general word in our day; hence the ruling would also appear to be general. But it must be remembered that the name “Christians” is used in a very limited sense in Lord’s Day 12. This article, therefore, must be interpreted in the light of our creeds and our liturgical forms. If this rule is followed and if the phrase in Article 56: “The covenant of God shall be sealed...” is followed, then it becomes evident that only children of communicant members of the church are eligible for baptism. These parents must be in good standing in the church — i.e., they must not be under discipline.

Our churches have the rule that adopted children shall be baptized only when their legal adoption is made final (cf. the footnote). There has been considerable difference of opinion on this question in Reformed churches. The questions have come up with respect to children born in covenant lines and those born outside covenant lines. And the questions have dealt with the time of baptism: whether baptism should take place immediately, after adoption is final, or when the children arrive at years of maturity. Still other questions have risen concerning children born illegitimately and concerning children whose parents have departed from the ways of the covenant.

However, the general statement of the article, “The covenant of God shall be sealed unto the children of *Christians*...” has usually in the Reformed churches been interpreted to mean that no re-baptism is necessary if a child has been baptized in the name of the Trinity. Our churches have generally followed this policy.

The article also speaks of the time of baptism: “As soon as the administration thereof is feasible.” Many in the past have followed what has become known as “*vroeg-doop*.” Roman Catholicism, with its view of the sacraments, generally baptizes a child as quickly as possible. This practice has also been followed in the Netherlands to a greater or lesser degree. Sometimes baptism was performed so quickly after birth that the mother was not present. This was followed by some who held to the view of presupposed regeneration. In some parts of the Netherlands this practice is still observed.

The article speaks of a “feasible” time. This feasibility must first of all be from the viewpoint of the church. Parents must secure permission from the consistory to have their child bap-

tized, so that the sacrament can be under consistorial jurisdiction. The necessary arrangements have to be made.

But the article speaks especially of feasibility from the viewpoint of the parents. The principle is that the sacrament must not be despised or de-emphasized. There must be a proper appreciation for its meaning, importance, and significance with respect to the covenant. Hence, on the one hand, both parents ought to be present. Both parents assume responsibility for the vow made at baptism. But, on the other hand, undue delay must be avoided.

Finally, the article speaks of the fact that the sacrament must be performed “in the public assembly when the Word of God is preached.” Private baptism has not been unusual. Rome practices such private baptism. But the Reformed churches permitted it in some instances. Today it is permitted no longer. The public worship service is the only proper place for the administration. It is a sacrament for the entire church. It is a part of the life of the church institute. It is, as a sacrament, attached to the preaching of the Word and has significance only in connection with the preaching.

ARTICLE 57

The ministers shall do their utmost to the end that the father present his child for baptism.

The original of Article 57 spoke of sponsors or godparents who could present children for baptism. This was a remnant from the Church of Rome, which believed that parents living in wedlock were too carnal to assume responsibility for baptism. This view was altered with the development of the scriptural view of marriage. But in some instances the practice was continued in the Reformed churches. The father assumed responsibility if he was living and was spiritually responsible. But sponsors could present the children if they were people of upright life.

In the revisions of 1905 and 1914 all mention of sponsors was eliminated.

The article stresses the responsibility of fathers. This is not intended to deny the responsibility of mothers, for they, too, answer to the vows made at baptism. But fathers are spoken of over against sponsors. Fathers are the heads of their wives and the heads of their families in the place given them of God. Their responsibility is to gain permission from the consistory and to assume the vows for the spiritual training of the children of the covenant as heads. It is preferable, therefore, that the father also present the child at the moment of baptism. There is a symbolism here which ought not to be ignored. It is a recognition of the headship of the father in the family.

ARTICLE 58

In the ceremony of baptism, both of children and of adults, the minister shall use the respective forms drawn up for the administration of this sacrament.

It is worth a short note to discuss the history of our Form for Baptism, which is referred to in this article. The Synod of Wezel (1568) referred to a form which had been drawn up by Peter

Datheen in conjunction with VanDerHeyden. This form was based upon other forms used by Calvin, à Lasco, Micronius, and Olevianus. Especially the questions were used.

Many churches were using different forms, so that the Synod of Dordt (1578) urged all churches to use the same form. This was done, although the form generally accepted underwent many revisions and alterations. Our present form is one prepared by Rutgers, Bavinck, and Kuyper, who took cognizance of decisions taken by the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619).

The form for the baptism of adults dates back to the Synod of Dordt (1618-1619). There were, prior to the Synod, other forms in existence for adult baptism. Dordt brought unanimity. The present form has a section inserted which explains baptism of adults in relation to the covenant.

The article requires the use of the adopted forms for both infant and adult baptism. These forms are ecclesiastically approved. They are sometimes referred to as “minor confessions,” because they explain the doctrinal significance of the ceremonies. It is obvious that this requirement is necessary for the unity of the church. Baptism is not only a ceremony. It is a divinely instituted sacrament in the church. Its significance and meaning is part of the confession of the church. The unity of the church must become evident also in liturgical oneness therefore. Although there is room for minor variation which does not touch upon the essence of the sacrament, the unity of a common sacrament must be preserved.

ARTICLE 59

Adults are through baptism incorporated into the Christian church, and are accepted as members of the church, and are therefore obliged also to partake of the Lord's Supper, which they shall promise to do at their baptism.

This article speaks of the relation between adult baptism and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. As a general rule in Reformed churches, children of believing parents are baptized and are therefore incorporated into the fellowship of the church as infants and through infant baptism. When adults are incorporated into the church as adults and through adult baptism, the rule of Article 59 applies.

There has been a problem with some who are not any more infants, but who also are not adults. Rules have been made to cover this problem, but they have proved failures. No rule can be made. Some children mature spiritually much faster than others. Each case, therefore, must be treated separately under the general principle that if one is able to understand the principles of the faith he must be considered an adult. If he is not, he must be considered an infant.

The article speaks of the fact that “Adults are through baptism incorporated into the Christian church....” By “Christian church” is meant the local congregation — in the Dutch *gemeente*, not *kerk*. But the administration of baptism differs between infants and adults. Infants are incorporated into the church by reason of their birth to believers on the basis of the covenant. Adults are incorporated into the church by reason of faith. Hence, in the case of adults, confession of faith must be made before one can be received as a member.

These adults are, therefore, under obligation to partake of the Lord's Supper after their baptism. They must promise to do this at baptism. The principle is, in brief, that the two sacraments

are inseparable. Baptism signifies incorporation into the covenant. The Lord's Supper signifies preservation within the covenant and conscious reception of the blessings of the covenant.

ARTICLE 60

The names of those baptized, together with those of the parents, and likewise the date of birth and baptism, shall be recorded.

This article was already decided upon at the Wezelian Convention. There were then civil reasons because of the close relation between church and state. The state kept no records at all, and the church was the only institution in a position to keep records of any kind.

But there are ecclesiastical reasons which make this article valid today. In the first place, according to Article 59, baptized members are incorporated into the Christian church, i.e., into the local congregation. The local congregation must have some record of its membership. In the second place, this is part of the decency and order which must characterize the life of the institute of the church. In the third place, from a practical point of view, these records are useful in working with children of the covenant, in transfers, etc.

The article requires a record of the names of those baptized, the names of the parents, the date of birth, and the date of baptism. These records ought to be kept by the consistory; ought to be kept up to date, so that they are accurate and complete; and ought to include cross references with the minutes of the consistory.

Originally the article spoke of the need to include the names of sponsors, but this was dropped in 1914 (cf. notes on Art. 57).

ARTICLE 61

None shall be admitted to the Lord's Supper except those who according to the usage of the church with which they unite themselves have made a confession of the Reformed religion, besides being reputed to be of a godly walk, without which those who come from other churches shall not be admitted.

Articles 61 through 64 deal with the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Article 61 speaks of admittance to the Lord's Supper.

The condition for admittance is that only those who "have made a confession of the Reformed religion, besides being reputed to be of a godly walk," shall be admitted to the Lord's table. The reference of the article is to the confession of faith of those who are born and baptized in the church.

Confession of faith is a personal confession of the individual, both as to his personal belief in the Reformed religion and to his personal participation in that faith. This confession must not be a general confession of faith. It must be specifically a confession of the truth of the *Reformed* faith. Nor must such a confession be a confession of "historical faith"; it must be of a living

faith. Hence it must include a confession of uprightness of walk, which is an inseparable part of true and living faith.

The consistory has the responsibility for the administration of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It is therefore also responsible for maintaining the purity of the Lord's table. Hence this confession must be made before the consistory, which examines applicants concerning the necessary requirements.

However, after the examination is complete, the names of those making confession of faith must be publicly announced to the congregation for their approbation. If any objections are made, they must be carefully considered and investigated. If there are no objections, public confession must take place according to the form for that purpose. Concerning this latter, there are no rules in our Church Order. But the usage is the same in all our churches.

The requirements also apply to people coming from other churches. First of all, the reference is to those who are from the same denomination. The same may apply to those coming from sister churches. In these cases, transfer papers contain a testimony from the consistory as to the faith and walk of those coming to the congregation. There are prescribed forms for this found in the Church Order Book. If a transferring member is an object of discipline, this is to be noted on the transfer papers. The attestation of a consistory has to be acknowledged and honored within the churches. Any questions which arise have to be resolved between the consistories concerned.

But the article refers also to those who come from other churches. This cannot take place by means of regular transfer, since any other church is not in a position to testify of the soundness of faith and uprightness of walk of its members according to the standards of our churches. Hence the regulation of the article must be observed through examination by the consistory. This examination must be carefully done and preceded by instruction, should this be necessary.

The Reformed churches have historically opposed open communion and maintained the principle of close communion. This is necessary to keep the Lord's table pure. Nor should members of our churches partake of communion in other denominations with which we have no denominational fellowship.

ARTICLE 62

Every church shall administer the Lord's Supper in such a manner as it shall judge most conducive to edification; provided, however, that the outward ceremonies as prescribed in God's Word be not changed, and all superstition be avoided, and that at the conclusion of the sermon and the usual prayers the form for the administration of the Lord's Supper, together with the prayer for that purpose, shall be read.

In general, the Church Order does not stipulate in detail the rules to be followed in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. It lays down the general principle that the administration of the sacrament must be, in the judgment of the consistory, conducive to edification. This is a sound scriptural principle and ought to be adhered to.

What are those matters which are left to the judgment of the local consistory? Some such matters are sitting or standing to receive the sacrament; coming forward or remaining in one's seat to receive the Lord's Supper; communal or individual cup; the thank-offering; eating the bread or drinking the wine in unison or as it is distributed; etc. In all these matters the consistory must judge whether a particular practice is most conducive to edification. They must judge whether it adds to or subtracts from the spiritual celebration of the sacrament. What is most conducive can change from time to time and according to the circumstances within the congregation. An example would be the size of the congregation, which fluctuates.

But other matters of the celebration of the sacrament are required. These belong to the essence of the sacrament. The standard for these elements is the prescription of the Word of God and the confessions. In these matters there may be no deviation. These basic elements are mentioned in Article 62.

- 1) The outward ceremonies such as the use of bread and wine, the breaking of bread, etc. It is quite possible that the pouring out of the wine belongs also here. It is not specifically mentioned in Scripture. But it seems to be implied in the symbolism of blood shed even as the bread is broken.
- 2) All superstition must be avoided. This refers to Rome's practice of kneeling in veneration of the host.
- 3) The preaching of the Word and the prescribed prayers must accompany the celebration of the sacrament.
- 4) The accepted form must be used. This form, along with the Baptism Form, is a "minor confession" adopted by the church. It must be used in the celebration of the sacrament. In this connection, the question arises whether it is proper to split the form in such a way that the first part dealing with self-examination is read on the Sunday prior to communion while the latter part is read at the communion service. The argument in favor of splitting the form is, first of all, that the Sunday prior to the celebration of the Lord's Supper is specifically reserved for preparatory. The essence of preparatory is self-examination. The part of the form dealing with self-examination more properly belongs with the preparatory service. Secondly, there is the practical consideration that the length of the form makes for a very long communion service if the whole form is read and leaves little time for the preaching.

Nevertheless, it certainly can never be wrong to read the part of the form dealing with self-examination immediately before the congregation partakes of the sacrament. And it will have to be admitted that the form is one, and that any break in it is artificial. It was not written to be read in two separate sections on two different Sundays.

The Church Order makes no mention of preparatory or applicatory sermons. However, questions concerning these sermons are included in the questions asked by the church visitors. This implies that such sermons are the rule in our churches.

ARTICLE 63

The Lord's Supper shall be administered at least every two or three months.

This article discusses the frequency of celebrating the Lord's Supper. In the early years of the Reformation the sacrament was celebrated far oftener than now. In some instances it was celebrated every week, but this varied from time to time, especially in times of persecution. This frequent celebration did not continue, and gradually the practice arose to celebrate the sacrament every two months.

It has sometimes been urged that the celebration of the sacraments on special Christian holidays is especially appropriate. Some churches, therefore, celebrate the sacrament on Easter, Pentecost, and even Christmas.

The general rule is "at least every two or three months." The minimum is, therefore, four times a year. But the celebration may be held more often. This, too, must be left to the decision of the local consistories.

While it is true that a more frequent celebration of the Lord's Supper may be conducive to greater edification, it is also well to remember that there is today an increasingly strong shift to liturgy in the church world. And this increasing emphasis upon liturgy is quite often rooted in a decline in the preaching. For one reason or another, the preaching is de-emphasized. People weary of it. To attract people to church, elaborate liturgical practices are substituted for the lively preaching of the Word. This must be avoided.

ARTICLE 64

The administration of the Lord's Supper shall take place only there where there is supervision of elders, according to the ecclesiastical order, and in a public gathering of the congregation.

Originally Article 64 dealt with a daily Vesper or prayer service. Such prayer services had been practiced in the Roman Catholic Church long before the time of the Reformation. The Reformed churches retained this custom, and daily prayer services were held in the late afternoon, at which services a portion of Scripture was explained and prayer made. But as early as 1574, various steps were taken by different synods to eliminate this custom. The reasons were:

- 1) That regular religious services on Sunday night be attended more diligently.
- 2) That family worship might be more diligently observed.
- 3) That common prayers held on days of fasting might be held more diligently and zealously.

By the seventeenth century the practice had died out entirely. Our version of the article was adopted in 1905 at Utrecht and in 1914 in our own country.

The first stipulation made by the article is that the Lord's Supper shall be celebrated only where there is supervision of elders. The reasons for this are:

- 1) The Lord's Supper is one of the means of grace.
- 2) The means of grace are given to the church to be dispensed and are, therefore, under the supervision of the elders.

3) This supervision is necessary in order that the table of the Lord be not profaned.

Such supervision prevents open communion. It makes impossible any celebration of communion by unorganized groups of believers. It prohibits any celebration by a branch of the congregation (cf. Art. 39). However, groups under the supervision of another consistory may celebrate communion under that supervision.

Secondly, the article stipulates that such celebration must take place according to the ecclesiastical order and in a public gathering of the congregation.

By the ecclesiastical order, the Church Order refers to the regulations and stipulations of Articles 61 and 62.

The need for the provision concerning the celebration of the sacrament in a public gathering of the congregation is to be found in the fact that the preaching of the Word and the sacraments belong together (cf. Art. 56). Further, part of the symbolism of the sacrament is the fellowship which believers have in the body of Christ. Hence, the congregation must gather in unison and communion at the Lord's table. The article, therefore, forbids private communion. This is sometimes practiced. In the Christian Reformed Church it was permitted with certain stipulations. It is sometimes requested by shut-ins and inmates of various institutions. But the article forbids it. The Synod of Middelburg in 1933 ruled against the practice in the Netherlands. It has never been an issue in our churches.

ARTICLE 65

Funerals are not ecclesiastical, but family affairs, and should be conducted accordingly.

In Articles 65 through 70 the Church Order speaks of various other ceremonies. Article 65 speaks of funeral services.

Rome held, prior to the Reformation, official funeral services. In that superstitious age it was believed that such services drove away evil spirits and aided the departed one in his journey through the realms of the dead. Such services had the added benefit of reminding people to pray for those in purgatory.

The Reformed churches were quite naturally opposed to this. They rejected the doctrinal grounds and were fearful of the superstition which grew around the practice. Hence various synods ruled consistently against the practice: Dordt in 1574; Dordt in 1578; Middelburg in 1581. Our present ruling was made in 1905 at Utrecht and was adopted in this country in 1914. In 1940 the Christian Reformed Church altered the reading: "Funerals are not ecclesiastical, but family affairs, and should be conducted accordingly."

The article forbids both funeral sermons and funeral services. Strictly speaking, these belong together, for there is no sermon where there are no services. But the article forbids both so that there will be no possibility of a service in an unofficial way. The reasons were:

- 1) Funeral services are forbidden because funerals are considered non-ecclesiastical.
- 2) The family has the responsibility to bury its dead.

3) The matter is outside the supervision of officebearers and outside the means of grace.

Our churches have followed the ruling of this article. We have no official services but simply a brief exposition of some portion of Scripture and appropriate prayers. There is no consistory present. There is no official gathering of the congregation. The friends and relatives meet in order that their attention may be called to the Word of God as the source and fountain of their hope and comfort in the midst of sorrow.

The question of cremation sometimes arises. There cannot, of course, be any principle objection against burning, since many of God's people have suffered martyrdom through burning. But it is not to be practiced, because it is often an act of defiance on the part of unbelievers and because Scripture speaks of the necessity of burial as a seed planted in the ground must be buried to rise. Hence, it is expressive of the believers' hope of the resurrection.

ARTICLE 66

In time of war, pestilence, national calamities, and other great afflictions, the pressure of which is felt throughout the churches, it is fitting that the classes proclaim a day of prayer.

The Reformation churches did not want the outward observance of days as practiced in the Romish church. Nevertheless, they felt the need for occasional special days of prayer. Hence this article was included. The original article contained two elements which have been eliminated. The first was a provision for the churches to ask the government to designate such days. The second was mention of fasting in connection with days of prayer.

A distinction is made between these days and the regular Prayer Day stipulated in Article 67. These days shall be called "in times of war, pestilence, national calamities, and other great afflictions." When God in His providence sends great calamities which affect the churches, classis shall call such a day of prayer. These days of prayer concern particularly the churches within a given classis which have been affected; but the reference may also be to calamities which affect the whole denomination.

Today this practice has become a national habit. Various days of prayer are proclaimed by the government. Our churches do not usually observe these days because the principle is wrong. Days of prayer are meant for the church alone, which can truly pray. The true nature of prayer must be preserved according to God's Word. The church must never make a mere petition for relief, but must recognize God's all-governing hand. She must confess her dependence upon God, her readiness to submit to God's will, her desire to seek the things which are above. Her concern must be, above all, for the preservation of God's cause.

The classis is designated as the body to proclaim such days. The classis therefore appoints a specific day in which all the churches within its boundaries hold special services. Our churches do not usually make use of this article, but it could be observed if a classis or a local congregation felt the need.

ARTICLE 67

The churches shall observe, in addition to the Sunday, also Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension Day, Pentecost, the Day of Prayer, the National Thanksgiving Day, and Old and New Year's Day.

In the early days of the Calvin Reformation, the Reformers (Zwingli, Farel, Calvin, Knox, etc.) prohibited special commemoration of the days mentioned in this article as being remnants of the Romish religion and as detracting from the observance of the Sabbath. They insisted on the observation of the Sabbath alone. This rule was maintained in the Lowlands at Dordt in 1574. But for practical reasons this was altered by Dordt in 1578 and subsequent synods, including the Synod of Dordt in 1618-1619. These days were government holidays and became legal days of recreation. Because of the dangers of worldliness and an improper celebration of the days, the church prescribed that they be commemorated as Christian holidays and that worship services be held on them. The Dutch revision of 1905 included only Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and Ascension Day. Our version includes also Good Friday, Prayer Day, Thanksgiving Day, Old and New Year's Days.

Concerning the requirements of the article the following is of importance:

- 1) The commemoration of these days in the church is for practical reasons. There is no principle involved in their celebration and no biblical reason why they ought to be observed. They are not special days of value such as the various Feast Days in the history of Israel. The celebration of them is not of any principle significance. Nor should the commemoration of the events remembered on these days be limited to these days alone.
- 2) They are not all of equal importance. Some are days commemorating various aspects of the work of Christ. Prayer Day is connected with the time of planting and is intended to commit the coming crop into the hands of the Lord, who gives us our daily provision. Thanksgiving Day is a national custom. Old Year's Day and New Year's Day are purely artificial.
- 3) The word "observe" in the article must be taken in the sense of gathering in public worship. These days must therefore be observed so long as our Church Order requires it. But all formalism, superstition, legalism, and outward formality must be avoided in their celebration.

ARTICLE 68

The ministers shall on Sunday explain briefly the sum of Christian doctrine comprehended in the Heidelberg Catechism, so that as much as possible the explanation shall be annually completed, according to the division of the catechism itself for that purpose.

The practice of Catechism teaching came to the Netherlands from Reformed churches in other countries. It is quite likely that as early as 1566 this practice was being observed in some individual congregations. The question came to the Synod of Dordt in 1574 whether it would not be advisable to make this a custom in all the churches. But this was not definitely decided upon

until 1586. In 1905 the words “as much as possible” were added. In 1914 several items were dropped of the original article. The phrase “which at this time has been accepted in the Netherlands Churches” was elided. The stipulation was omitted which required the preaching of the Catechism in the afternoon service. The word “Heidelberg” was added.

When the practice was first begun, it met with considerable opposition among the people. VanDellen and Monsma observe that this opposition came especially from people who seldom attended church and who disliked the sound doctrine. It may have been precisely for this reason that the practice was commonly accepted in the churches.

The article requires a brief explanation of the sum of Christian doctrine as comprehended in the Heidelberg Catechism. This must be done so that the entire Catechism is completed yearly as much as possible. The purpose of this requirement is chiefly that there may be regular and systematic exposition of the truths of Scripture. It is easy for a minister to choose only practical texts or to choose texts with certain doctrines while other doctrines are avoided. Preaching from the Catechism will insure the preaching of all the doctrines of Scripture. This is necessary in order that the congregation may grow in the knowledge of the truth of God’s Word. Sound doctrine is the heart of the faith by which the believer knows God, whom to know is life eternal. And, indeed, his practical life in the world will only be right and good when it is rooted in the knowledge of the truth. The Catechism is admirably suited to accomplish this purpose. It treats doctrine systematically, including in it all the fundamentals of the Christian faith. And it treats this doctrine from the experiential viewpoint.

Some have objected that Catechism preaching is not scriptural preaching. But this objection is without basis. Catechism preaching is preaching on the doctrines found in Scripture. These doctrines are based upon various texts taken together, for Scripture is not a handbook of systematic theology. When the minister preaches from the Catechism, he must carefully show that these doctrines are the truth of the Word of God.

While it is impossible for a minister to preach through the whole Catechism in one year, he ought not to neglect Catechism preaching on Sundays when it is possible to preach from it. Sometimes special occasions arise; sometimes Christian holidays fall on Sunday; sometimes he must turn from the Catechism for communion services; it is not possible always to treat an entire Lord’s Day in one sermon. All these things make it impossible to cover the fifty-two Lord’s Days in one year. Nevertheless, the minister should make every effort to preach through the Catechism as quickly as possible. Preaching on the Catechism from different points of view will give a minister opportunity to cover all the material over several years. He should not try to exhaust every Lord’s Day before proceeding on to the next.

ARTICLE 69

In the churches only the 150 Psalms of David, the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the Twelve Articles of Faith, the Songs of Mary, Zacharias, and Simeon, the Morning and Evening Hymns, and the Hymn of Prayer before the sermon shall be sung.

While in the early years of the Reformation, Zwingli forbade any congregational singing — probably as a reaction to Rome’s liturgy. The other Reformers generally favored it, although they objected to the use of choirs. The history of the Dutch Psalm-book goes back to the beginning of the Reformation.

There were always those who favored the introduction of hymns into the public worship services. Gradually songs other than the Psalms were introduced. This was especially true after the Synod of Dordrecht 1619-’19. The Afscheiding restored the use of the Psalms.

Our present article is an approximate translation of the Dutch article revised in 1905 by the Synod of Utrecht. The revision was based on the version of 1618-1619 but with a few added elements. The original article read: “In the churches there shall be sung only the 150 Psalms of David, the Ten Commandments, the Lord’s Prayer, the 12 Articles of Faith, and the Songs of Mary, Zacharias, and Simeon. The hymn “*O God, die onze Vader zijt*” is left to the freedom of the churches, whether to use it or omit it. All other hymns shall be banned from the churches, and where some have already been introduced, they shall by the most suitable means be excluded.” Thus there were six hymns approved and one left to the discretion of the churches. In 1905 the Hymn of Prayer before the Sermon and the Morning and Evening Hymns were added. The last sentence was excluded from our present version.

It is obvious that the present article has no meaning for us today because it refers exclusively to the Dutch versification of the Psalms and to Dutch hymns. Our present United Presbyterian Psalter was adopted in 1914 as it was drawn up by an interdenominational committee. It includes versifications of the Psalms set to various types of music, several chorales, two versions of the Lord’s Prayer, several doxologies, “America,” and three hymns. Since the adoption of the Psalter, most churches which formerly used it have adopted other books of praise, in which have been incorporated a large number of hymns. But Article 69 remained intact until recent revisions and, even though outdated in our churches, it has remained in its old form. The synod of our churches considered an overture to revise Article 69 in the years 1959-1962. The matter was discussed at length but finally dropped. Perhaps partly the reason why it was dropped was because, while the original intent of the overture was to revise the article and make room for additional versifications of Scripture, it was interpreted by some to open the door for all sorts of hymns (cf. the Acts of 1959-1962 for additional details).

The fundamental principle of Article 69 is that congregational singing is an important part of the worship service. It is in this light that choirs must also be considered undesirable. The same is true of instrumental music. It is good for accompaniment, but it is not good when it takes the place of congregational singing. The organ music which is played at the beginning of the service ought also to be in keeping with the spirit of worship and ought to be conducive to lead the people into a proper frame of mind to bow in worship before God.

As far as the “hymn question” itself is concerned, it is apparent that the introduction of hymns into the church in the past has always been a source of trouble. Hymns have become vehicles of introducing heresy into the church in some instances. Especially modern hymns are not proper music for worship services. Often they reflect the music of the world. They are doctrinally unsound in many instances. They are man-centered, while Scripture is always God-centered. They therefore rob the church of the spirit of worship. However, there is room for improvement in our present Psalter, both in the versification of the Psalms and in the music. There is also a place for the versification of other parts of Scripture in the song book of the

church. But we should limit ourselves to these improvements and not attempt to put the hymns of our day into our worship songbooks.

ARTICLE 70

The consistories shall see to it that those who marry, marry in the Lord, whether it be in a private ceremony or in an official worship service. When the solemnization of marriage takes place in an official worship service, the adopted form for that purpose shall be used.

The original formulation of Article 70 is to be explained by the fact that it was influenced by practices in the Netherlands. There the State had taken the power to solemnize marriages some time after the Reformation had come into the Lowlands. The church itself was interested in the State doing this because the church recognized, on the one hand, that there is a “legal” aspect to marriage, and recognized, on the other hand, that the church could not function in the sphere of the State. Hence the article speaks of the fact that “the matrimonial state be *confirmed* in the presence of Christ’s church” rather than that the matrimonial state be solemnized in the church. The practice in the Netherlands is therefore that the ceremony first be performed before a civil magistrate and then confirmed before the church.

In our country it is different. The clergy act as legal functionaries of the State in marriage ceremonies. Thus the civil and spiritual aspects of the solemnization of marriage are combined in one by the minister.

The present formulation places upon consistories the responsibility of seeing to it that the young people in the church marry spouses with whom they are one in the faith of Christ. This unity of faith means that both husband and wife must be members of the same church and confess the same truth. A marriage in the Lord is a marriage in which Christ who is the truth is the Head.

The consistories, in assuming this responsibility, must, on family visitation and in all their oversight of the youth of the flock, encourage the young people to seek godly spouses. The elders must also warn against the wrong of marriages not rooted in a common faith, and they must warn against the sin of leaving the true church for purposes of marrying a spouse from a different denomination (Arts. 28 and 29 of the Confession of Faith).

There are arguments for and against church weddings. Against church weddings it can be argued that they are not in the strictest sense ecclesiastical functions. Besides, there is always the danger of making of marriage a sacrament, as Rome does, if weddings are solemnized during worship services and if they do become ecclesiastical functions.

In favor of church weddings, however, it can be argued: 1) they will, of necessity, be far more solemn than they often are now when they become little more than show. 2) they will impress more effectively on the church and the married couple the holiness of marriage — something sorely needed in our day.

If church weddings should ever become common practice, it would be well to consider some basic changes: 1) It is preferable that the wedding then beheld in Sunday services. 2) Many of

the frills, the foolish songs, the silly receptions would have to be discarded. 3) Both marriage partners would have to be members of the church. 4) The emphasis should be on the reflection in marriage of the relation between Christ and His church. Hence, the bridegroom should be on the foreground, not the bride.

However all this may be, it is obvious that Article 70 is in need of revision.

Of Censure and Admonition

ARTICLE 71

As Christian discipline is of a spiritual nature, and exempts no one from civil trial or punishment by the authorities, so also besides civil punishment there is need of ecclesiastical censures, to reconcile the sinner with the church and his neighbor and to remove the offense out of the church of Christ.

This article begins the last main section of the Church Order and treats “Of Censure and Ecclesiastical Admonition.” The contents of this section are:

- 1) Article 71 — The Character of Christian Discipline.
- 2) Articles 72, 73 — Reconciliation of Private Sins.
- 3) Articles 74-78 — The Reconciliation and Censure of Public Sins.
- 4) Articles 79, 80 — The Discipline of Officebearers, Including Suspension and Deposition from Office.
- 5) Article 81 — *Censura Morum*.
- 6) Articles 82-86 — Various articles which do not directly relate to the subject of discipline.

The exercise of Christian discipline is itself the preaching of the gospel. The Heidelberg Catechism, in Lord’s Day XXXI, speaks of the kingdom of heaven being opened and shut both by the preaching of the gospel and the exercise of the keys of the kingdom. Thus, essentially, (as is also true of the sacraments) the exercise of Christian discipline is official proclamation of the Word of God. This is true of the admonitions, reproofs, etc. which are a part of Christian discipline. But this is also true of the various procedures to be followed in the application of censure upon the individual sinner. Thus the exercise of the keys of the kingdom has the same twofold effect as the preaching has (cf. II Cor. 2:14-16). Discipline is the means of salvation to God’s people. It is the means of hardening the wicked and impenitent.

The basis for the exercise of discipline is completely scriptural. Already in the Old Testament, discipline was practiced (cf., e.g., Ex. 22:20; Lev. 24:11-16; and other passages). But with the establishment of the new dispensational church, the exercise of Christian discipline comes to its clearest expression. The two key passages are those found in Matthew 16:16-19 and Matthew 18:15-20. But other passages include John 20:23; Romans 16:17; I Thessalonians 5:14; II Thessalonians 3:6, 14; I Timothy 5:1, 2; I Corinthians 5:1-5.

In keeping with the character of the Church Order as a whole, these articles concerning discipline lay down only the general and fundamental rules of discipline. The articles do not themselves speak of the principles inherent in the work of discipline. Nor do they speak of specific rules and define the whole process of discipline in every respect. The basic rules which the Church Order gives are rooted in the principles of Scripture. But each individual case of discipline must be considered separately, as far as the application of these general and basic rules is concerned. Discipline is too important a work of the church to be bound inflexibly with a multitude of rules intended to cover every single case which could possibly come up in the church.

Article 71 distinguishes Christian discipline from civil punishments: “As Christian discipline is of a spiritual nature, and exempts no one from civil trial or punishment by the authorities, so also besides civil punishment there is need of ecclesiastical censures....” It is true that civil punishment and ecclesiastical censure both have to do with an individual’s conduct. But the two must nevertheless be clearly distinguished. Basically, civil penalties are physical, for the magistrate bears the sword; ecclesiastical discipline is spiritual, i.e., it has to do with the opening and closing of the kingdom of *heaven*. Hence, civil punishment deals with an individual as a citizen within the State, the discipline of the church deals with a member of the church of Christ as it is manifested in its institutional form. Civil punishment has as its goal the preservation of order in society; the discipline of the church has as its goal the salvation of the members and the maintenance of the purity of the church. Civil punishment is based upon civil law; Christian discipline is based upon the law of the kingdom of heaven, i.e., the Word of God. Civil punishment is meted out in order that justice may be satisfied; the exercise of the keys by the church is to bring to repentance the sinner who strays from God’s precepts.

These two spheres must always be kept distinct. Even if the same individual, guilty of but one sin, falls under the jurisdiction of both State and church, the two spheres of authority must be kept separate. The sinner may be reconciled to the church so that he is freed from discipline and restored to the fellowship of the people of God. But he is not, by this, exempted from the penalties which the State is obligated to impose upon him. And, if he satisfies the justice of the State for a crime committed, this satisfaction of justice by the State does not exempt him from the discipline of the church.

Turning now to the purpose of discipline, the article defines that purpose as being “to reconcile the sinner with the church and his neighbor and to remove the offense out of the church of Christ.”

The purpose of discipline is both negative and positive. From the positive viewpoint, discipline belongs to the realm of grace. Its purpose is always, fundamentally, to save the sinner in the way of repentance. This is not only objectively true as far as the process of censure as the preaching of the Word of God is concerned; this must be subjectively true as well. The officebearers, in the exercise of censure, must be motivated exclusively by the desire to save the sinner. Never must their motive in discipline be “to kick out” an individual from the church. The salvation of the sinner must guide them in all their actions. Only when it becomes irrefutably evident that the Word of God itself has hardened the impenitent can final excommunication be applied. It is well to remember in this connection that the Word of God is the power of discipline. The officebearer has no power to exercise the keys of the kingdom of himself. When God binds in heaven what is bound on earth this is not because God merely concurs in the decisions of men. The officebearer has no authority apart from the Word of God which he brings. He

must bring that Word. And that Word of God must do its work. In the power of that Word, which never returns void, the officebearer must put his trust.

But there is also a negative aspect to discipline. Offense must be removed from the church of Christ. "Offense," in the scriptural meaning of that word, is that which causes another to stumble. The church is called to be the manifestation of the body of Christ in the world, which body is holy. If sin appears in that body of Christ, reproach, confusion, separation, offense, and injury disrupt the communion and fellowship of the faithful. This offense must be removed, both for the sake of the church as a whole and for the sake of the individual members in the church. The sin is removed and fellowship is restored when the sinner repents and reconciliation is accomplished. But it is sometimes necessary for the offense to be removed by excluding the sinner. By his refusal to repent, he reveals that he is not, in his heart, a true member of Christ's body. Hence this sinner must be cut off, lest the whole body become infected with a diseased member, the table of the Lord be desecrated, and Satan succeed in his nefarious purpose of destroying the church with evil from within (cf. the Form for Excommunication).

The Church Order mentions two classes of sins for which censure is applied: error in doctrine and offense in conduct (cf. Art. 72). The idea of the Church Order is surely not that all sins become the object of ecclesiastical discipline. All the saints are very imperfect and are constantly guilty of many sins. But the saints confess these sins both to God and to one another. And, indeed, in the church where love reigns, the saints assume of one another (unless there is reason to believe the contrary) that each confesses his sins (cf., e.g., I Pet. 4:8). These sins do not, in themselves, create offense, schism, or a breach in the fellowship of the church. Rather the Church Order speaks of two classes of sins which create offense in the church because they are not repented of. These sins are sins in which the truth of God's Word is denied, or sins which violate God's holy law. They would, if allowed to remain, destroy the fellowship of the saints, put a blot on the holiness of the church, and in some instances be occasion for the evil world to blaspheme. This latter was, for example, the case with the sin of David. Nathan, in speaking to David of his sin of adultery and murder, reminded David that "Thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme" (II Sam. 12:14).

Yet, in the final analysis, there is only one sin which is worthy of censure: the sin of impenitence. All sins are equally serious and demand repentance before God. And all sins are pardonable if the sinner repents. When such repentance is manifested, the church forgives as God forgives, and the sin is completely removed. Only when sin is not repented of is discipline invoked. Even then, however, discipline is applied for impenitence of a particular sin.

The question often arises: Who are the objects of discipline? The question does not now refer to the fact that the objects of discipline are the impenitent sinners. But the question refers to two problems especially in the church: can non-communicant members be disciplined? And, is it possible for impenitent people to escape discipline by leaving the fellowship of the church before discipline is exercised? In connection with this latter, the question is asked: May a consistory refuse to grant an individual who is the object of discipline his (or her) papers in order that discipline may be continued?

In answer to the first question, the Reformed churches have historically taken the position that discipline may not be applied to baptized members but to confessing members only. Baptized members have not yet made profession of their faith. And while this does not exclude their sin from the need for repentance, it does exclude them from formal discipline. But the churches

would do well to examine this question a bit more closely. On the one hand, it must be recognized that only those who are themselves responsible for their sins can also be the proper objects of discipline. A small child, yet in need of instruction, cannot be properly disciplined. But the fact remains that when a youth comes to intellectual and spiritual maturity, he sins responsibly before God and the church. And, on the other hand, there have been countless instances in the church when young people put off making confession of faith for many years — even into adulthood. It may very well be that this failure to make confession of faith is itself reason for discipline.

In answer to the second question, the Reformed churches have always taken the position, and correctly so, that a man's membership in the church is a matter of his individual choice. If he decides to terminate that membership, this decision cannot be resisted, and the man's request for his papers cannot be refused. Nevertheless, a consistory which is faced with such a problem (which happens very often in the church) ought not quickly "to breathe a sigh of relief" that the request for papers has freed them from the need to apply discipline. The consistory ought to attempt to dissuade such a one from his intention, reminding him of his promise made at the time of his confession of faith to submit to church government if he should become delinquent. The consistory ought to show such a one patiently that the purpose of discipline is to save; that the discipline of the consistory is the rod of Christ's chastisement; that to leave the church is a very serious sin and an unsuccessful attempt to escape the discipline of Christ. Only after doing all this, if a person should still persist in his request, should the papers be given. This, of course, brings discipline to its conclusion.

ARTICLE 72

In case anyone errs in doctrine or offends in conduct, as long as the sin is of a private character, not giving public offense, the rule clearly prescribed by Christ in Matthew 18 shall be followed.

The article appears in our Church Order in essentially the same form in which it was adopted by the Convention of Wezel, 1568. The only difference of importance is that the Convention of Wezel held that Matthew 18 applies only to sins of conduct; and that, therefore, sins of doctrine must be reported directly to the consistory, even though they are of a "private character." But in 1571 the Synod of Emden decided that also sins of doctrine, when of a private character, must be treated according to the principles of the Lord in Matthew 18.

Matthew 18:15-17 reads as follows: "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican."

Surely this passage refers to sins of doctrine as well as sins of conduct. A brother may sin against another brother by defending doctrines in conflict with the Word of God as well as by

engaging in conduct at variance with the principles of Scripture. The correction of Emden was right.

The article speaks of two matters: 1) What sins are ground of discipline? 2) What is the procedure to be followed in the case of private sins?

In answer to the first question, the article speaks of the case of anyone who “errs in doctrine or offends in conduct.” The first of these refers to any false doctrine which is contrary to the confessions of the church. There is, outside of the limitations of the confessions, room for freedom of thought in matters of the understanding of the truth of Scripture. But the confessions contain what the church believes to be the truth of God’s Word. This truth is the basis for the unity of the church. This truth must be protected and defended. One who teaches doctrine which is contrary to the truth of the confessions becomes worthy of censure. He creates a breach in the fellowship of the people of God, gives offense in doctrine, and makes it necessary for the offense to be removed.

One who offends in conduct is one who in his life walks in ways which are contrary to the law of God and the principles of the citizens of the kingdom of heaven. The church of Christ is Christ’s holy bride. When one of the members sins, he sins against that holiness of the church and creates offense among the people of God.

The article speaks of these sins as committed in private. In general, sins of a private character are sins committed which are known to very few in the church. These sins do not give public offense within the church, but give offense to but a few members. It is not always very easy to say when a sin ceases to be a private sin and when it becomes public. The question has often been asked: How many have to know of a sin before it is public in character? The answer to this question cannot be given by setting definite figures. The circumstances must determine this question. A sin committed in a large congregation may remain private, while in a small congregation it is soon public though the number of those who know of the sin is the same. This must, in individual cases, be decided with wisdom and discretion on the basis of the general principle: a private offense gives no offense to the congregation as a whole.

The procedure to be followed is “the rule clearly prescribed by Christ in Matthew 18.” Christ lays down three steps to be followed in that passage, the third of which is treated in Article 74, which confer. The first step is: “If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone.” This does not, of course, preclude the possibility of the one who has committed the offense going to seek forgiveness from his brother (cf. Matt. 5:23, 24). But the one sinned against is, by Christ, laid under the solemn obligation to go to his brother and tell him his fault.

This implies several important truths. In the first place, it implies that the one against whom the sin has been committed must go to make clear to his brother the nature of the sin and why, on the basis of God’s Word, his action was sin. This implies in the second place, that the purpose for going is to achieve reconciliation by the removal of the offense. Jesus adds: “If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.” And in the third place this implies the truth that one must go with the desire and motive to “save thy brother”; one must go in a spirit of humility and love in the consciousness of his own need of the cross of Christ.

The second step to be followed is: “If he will not hear thee, take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.” This principle of

the Mosaic law (cf. Deut. 19:15) is here applied to the new dispensation. The purpose of taking witnesses is twofold. If the one who has sinned denies that he has sinned, the witnesses establish the fact that he has sinned. If one denies that what he has done is a sin although he does not deny having done a certain thing, the witnesses establish the fact that his conduct was indeed, according to God's Word, a sin to be repented of.

If the sinner repents of his sin, the matter is finished and forgotten. The offense has been removed from the church of Christ.

ARTICLE 73

Secret sins of which the sinner repents, after being admonished by one person in private or in the presence of two or three witnesses, shall not be laid before the consistory.

The Synod of Emden had an additional provision affixed to this article. It ruled that secret sins which constituted a grave threat to the church or State ought to be reported to the minister of the church even though these sins were repented of. The purpose was to gain the advice of the minister so that the one who was aware of the sin might know what further to do about it to protect the church. This provision was dropped by the Synod of Dordt in 1578.

The article speaks of the reconciliation of persons involved in a secret sin. If such reconciliation is accomplished either after the first step prescribed by the Lord in Matthew 18 is followed, or after the second step is followed, the sin shall not be reported to the consistory. The reason for this is quite obvious. By repentance on the part of the sinner, the sin is removed. Evil has been taken out of the church of Christ. The offense is no longer present. The breach struck by sin is healed. Reconciliation is accomplished and the communion of the saints restored. There is no need for any further disciplinary action.

There is a fundamental principle involved in this article. This principle is that the saints are mutually responsible for exercising discipline over each other. This is the clear teaching of many passages in Scripture. We refer, e.g., to I Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 3:12, 13; Romans 15:14; Galatians 6:1; James 5:19, 20.

It is because of this general principle that the congregation, functioning in the office of believers, participates in the entire procedure of discipline even when the work of discipline is performed by the consistory. But it must be remembered always that all believers have a direct part in this important work. It must be not only negative, but positive. Not only must believers, among themselves, admonish one another because of sin; they must also encourage one another, bear each other's burdens, aid each other in the difficult battle of faith. And this must always be in the full awareness that all the people of God meet together at the foot of the cross.

ARTICLE 74

If anyone, having been admonished in love concerning a secret sin by two or three persons, does not give heed, or otherwise has committed a public sin, the matter shall be reported to the consistory.

The basic idea of Article 74 was already expressed by the Convention of Wezel. The Synod of Emden formulated the present article as we now have it, with the exception of the words “in love.” These words were added by the Synod of ’s Gravenhage in 1587. No doubt the purpose of adding these words was to impress upon the saints that a mere outward conformity to the letter of Christ’s injunction in Matthew 18 is not sufficient. The obligation is placed upon believers earnestly to seek the repentance of an erring brother. They must do this personally until it becomes apparent to them that their best efforts will not result in repentance and reconciliation. Only then should they proceed to tell the matter to the consistory.

The article speaks of sins which shall be reported to the consistory. They are of two kinds. First of all, private sins shall be reported to the consistory if the sinner does not repent even after being admonished by two or three persons. This is the third step which Christ mentions in Matthew 18. By the word “church” in that passage, the consistory is, no doubt, referred to. This is in keeping with the position which the officebearers occupy in the church of Christ. This is also the interpretation given to this word by the Form of Ordination of Elders and Deacons: “And thus the ministers of the Word, together with the elders, form a body or assembly, being as a council of the church, representing the whole church; to which Christ alludes when he saith, ‘Tell the church’ — which can in no wise be understood of all and every member of the church in particular, but very properly of those who govern the church, out of which they are chosen.”

In connection with the reports which come to the consistory, the elders must carefully observe several important principles. They must be sure that the report brought to them is the report of a witness; i.e., of one against whom the offense has been committed. Never may the consistory act on the basis of mere rumor or gossip. Secondly, the consistory must be sure, before they proceed, that the injunctions of Matthew 18 have been carefully observed. If they have not, the consistory may not enter into the case; they must rather admonish the reporter to follow this Christ-prescribed way before coming to them. In the third place, if they are satisfied that Matthew 18 has been followed, that the report is brought by a witness, that indeed a sin is committed, then they must investigate from the alleged sinner himself before proceeding to further action. They must give the person against whom charges are brought an opportunity to defend himself and to explain his position. They must themselves discover whether the sinner is indeed guilty of the sin reported to them and that he is impenitent. Only then can they proceed to make discipline an official matter.

Secondly, the article speaks of the fact that public sins shall be reported to the consistory. It is possible, of course, that a sinner may himself report a sin to the consistory before the sin is even known to the congregation and before it becomes public. It is also possible that the sin committed is so public that the consistory is made aware of it without the sin being reported by another member. In any case, the point of the article is that public sins are the business of the consistory. Although Matthew 18 itself does not apply in the case of public sins, this does not alter the fact that the individual members of the congregation still are obligated to admonish the sinner in love. The fact that a case becomes officially the business of the consistory does not absolve the congregation from responsibility in this matter. But the offense is one which, in its nature, affects the whole congregation. The breach is struck, not between two individuals in the congregation, but between one member and the rest of his fellow saints. The whole church must therefore act; but it must act through its officebearers. Furthermore, the responsibility falls upon

officebearers to act in these circumstances because they are responsible for the supervision and government of the church. Discipline becomes their work specifically.

ARTICLE 75

The reconciliation of all such sins as are of their nature of a public character, or have become public because the admonition of the church was despised, shall take place (upon sufficient evidence of repentance) in such a manner as the consistory shall deem conducive to the edification of each church. Whether in particular cases this shall take place in public shall, when there is a difference of opinion about it in the consistory, be considered with the advice of two neighboring churches or of the classis.

This article speaks of the reconciliation of public sins — in distinction from the reconciliation of private sins spoken of in Article 73. It is possible, although Article 73 does not mention this, that the reconciliation of a private sin takes place after the sin has been made known to the consistory. It shall also in this instance be treated as a private sin, although reconciliation will have to be taken care of in the presence of the consistory. Public sins, according to Article 75, are of two kinds. The first kind is a sin which is, in its very nature, public. That is, the congregation, in whole or in large part, is aware of the sin. The second kind is a sin that was private but becomes public “because the admonition of the church was despised.” That is, the consistory made every effort to bring the sinner to repentance, but the sinner refused. The consistory was forced, because of this continued impenitence, to announce the matter to the congregation (cf. Art. 77). There is, then, repentance and reconciliation only after the sin has been announced.

The ground of reconciliation is “sufficient evidence of repentance.” Ordinarily, such sufficient evidence of repentance is a confession of sin on the part of the sinner and a promise to continue in the sin no longer. But it happens many times that a sinner confesses a sin, is reconciled to the church, and falls into the same sin again. It is with this possibility in mind that our Church Order speaks of “*sufficient evidence of repentance.*” The consistory must be sure in such a case that the repentance is sincere. It has not been at all uncommon in the Reformed churches to require of such a one that he be “on probation” for a designated length of time. If such a procedure is followed, the sinner is received back into the church, but is barred temporarily from the use of the sacraments until it becomes evident that he has forsaken his sinful ways. The consistory must exercise great caution lest the discipline of the church be despised and become an object of ridicule. Yet, at the same time, the consistory must not forget the injunction of the Lord to forgive the brother “till seventy times seven.”

The method to be followed is also discussed in this article. In general, the Church Order lays down the fundamental rule that this shall be done “in such a manner as the consistory shall deem conducive to the edification of each church.” The consistory must take into account the nature of the sin, the reconciled sinner, the circumstances prevailing in the congregation, etc. and determine how best the spiritual well-being of the congregation will be served. Generally, reconciliation is accomplished in the presence of the consistory, and an announcement is prepared in which the congregation is informed. If this procedure is followed, the announcement itself should be

adopted by the consistory. And the announcement should be made orally and not via the bulletin. The goal which the Consistory strives for is the removal of the breach struck in the congregation by the sin committed, the restoration of fellowship between the congregation and the sinner, and the emphasis on the importance of the church keeping herself pure in the world.

The Church Order considers also the possibility that reconciliation shall take place publicly. That is, reconciliation does not then take place in the presence of the consistory with an announcement made from the pulpit; rather, the reconciliation itself takes place under the supervision of the consistory, but in the presence of the whole congregation at a divine worship service.

While approving of this method in general, the Reformed churches have approached it with a great deal of caution. The Synod of Emden in the Netherlands ruled that a unanimous vote was required by the consistory before this procedure could be followed. In 1586 the Reformed churches decided that if a church had but one minister, the advice of the two neighboring consistories had to be sought in every case. Prior to this, the Synod of Middelburg (1581) had designated the classis as the body whose advice had to be sought. At present, in the Netherlands, if a congregation has more than one minister, a simple majority vote is sufficient, although the procedure of seeking the advice of neighboring consistories or classis has to be followed if a congregation has only one minister.

Our present article requires a unanimous decision of the consistory if such a reconciliation is to take place publicly. If no unanimity of opinion can be reached, the advice of two neighboring consistories is sought. All three consistories must meet together to discuss the case, but must meet separately to vote. In case of disagreement between the consistories, the advice of classis must be sought.

ARTICLE 76

Such as obstinately reject the admonition of the consistory, and likewise those who have committed a public or otherwise gross sin, shall be suspended from the Lord's Supper. And if he, having been suspended, after repeated admonitions, shows no signs of repentance, the consistory shall at last proceed to the extreme remedy, namely, excommunication, agreeably to the form adopted for that purpose according to the Word of God. But no one shall be excommunicated except with advice of the classis.

In this article, dealing with the discipline of unrepentant sinners, we come to the very essence of Christian discipline. It is for this reason that the practice outlined in this article dates back to the Calvin Reformation in Geneva. Already Calvin insisted on the essential procedure outlined in Article 76.

Two different kinds of cases are referred to in the article as cases to be resolved by suspension from the Lord's table. The first deals with "such as obstinately reject the admonition of the consistory." These may be people who have committed a private sin which is not repented of and which is brought to the attention of the consistory. Even after the consistory has admonished such people, they refuse to repent and heed the admonition of the Word of God as brought by the

consistory. These may also be those who have committed a public sin which has come to the attention of the consistory because of its public nature. In this case, too, the sinner is admonished by the consistory to repent. If he should refuse, he must be suspended from the table of the Lord. The second deals with “those who have committed a public or otherwise gross sin.” The distinction to which the article refers is undoubtedly a distinction between sins which are less offensive in the congregation and sins which are direct violations of the law of God. When a sinner commits such a “gross” sin, he must be immediately barred from the table of the Lord. The Church Order does not mean to suggest that some sins are, from the viewpoint of God, worse sins than others. Rather the Church Order looks at the matter from the viewpoint of the effect of the sin in the congregation. Some sins in their nature are so heinous that immediate suspension is necessary. But once again, such suspension shall only take place if the sinner refuses to repent.

The character of such discipline is twofold. Discipline must first of all be suspension from the table of the Lord. This implies several truths.

- 1) This does not only involve barring the sinner from communion lest the Lord’s table be desecrated; but it also involves barring from all membership privileges. Such an impenitent sinner has no right to the sacrament of baptism, to vote on a congregational meeting, to protest and appeal in matters other than his own case.
- 2) The meaning of such suspension is that the sinner is barred from the means of grace. He is, because of his sin, separated from the fellowship of the church, refused the means of grace which Christ gives only to those who live out of faith in His Word, and deprived of his place in the congregation of the godly.
- 3) This is sometimes called *stille censure* or “silent censure” because the congregation is not yet made aware of the action of the consistory (cf. Art. 77).
- 4) This is sometimes also called *excommunication minor*. It is distinguished from *excommunication major*, of which the last part of the article speaks. Suspension from the Lord’s table is essentially excommunication; but the process of censure in the church of Christ is over a period of time. The purpose of all censure is, by means of the Word of God, to bring the sinner to repentance. Thus the consistory labors with a person, addressing him again and again with the Word of God, even after he has been suspended.
- 5) Sometimes a distinction is made between simple suspension and definite suspension. The former refers to temporary suspension from the Lord’s table for various reasons other than obstinate rejection. Such reasons may be suspicion of sin, a report of sin which comes too late for the consistory to investigate thoroughly, dispute between various members as to whether a sin has been committed, etc. In such a case the consistory bars such from the Lord’s table until the matter can be resolved and definite decisions made. The latter refers to the suspension spoken of in this article.

Finally, the article speaks of the fact that suspension must be followed by excommunication. Before excommunication, however, various admonitions must be directed to the sinner (cf. Art. 77).

The ground of final excommunication is that “after repeated admonitions” the sinner “shows no signs of repentance.”

Final excommunication is called in the article “the extreme remedy.” This is because this act of excommunication is the definite exercise of the keys of the kingdom whereby the “door” of the kingdom is shut to an unbeliever. Then that which is bound on earth is also bound in heaven. Such a person is barred forever from the kingdom of God unless at some future time he still repents (cf. Art. 78). But because this is the extreme remedy, this can be performed only after repeated admonitions. The consistory must be sure that the sinner is completely impenitent. And the consistory may rest assured that the sinner will manifest himself in this way also. After all, the Word of God hardens as well as brings to repentance. And only after that hardening influence of the Word has become manifest in the sinner should this extreme remedy be used. By means of it the church is rid of an evil and harmful member who, if allowed to remain in the church, would cause untold harm.

The article stipulates that the Form adopted for the purpose of excommunication shall be used. This is also a liturgical form, a minor confession, which the churches use in common and whereby they express their common faith.

But no one may be excommunicated without the advice of the classis. For further discussion of this point, confer the notes on Article 77.

ARTICLE 77

After the suspension from the Lord’s table, and subsequent admonitions, and before proceeding to excommunication, the obstinacy of the sinner shall be publicly made known to the congregation; the offense explained, together with the care bestowed upon him, in reproof, suspension from the Lord’s Supper, and repeated admonition; and the congregation shall be exhorted to speak to him and to pray for him. There shall be three such admonitions. In the first the name of the sinner shall not be mentioned that he be somewhat spared. In the second, with the advice of the classis, his name shall be mentioned. In the third the congregation shall be informed that (unless he repent) he will be excluded from the fellowship of the church, so that his excommunication, in case he remains obstinate, may take place with the tacit approbation of the church. The interval between the admonitions shall be left to the discretion of the consistory.

This article in the Church Order is a further explanation of the words in Article 76 “after repeated admonitions.” Article 76 spoke of suspension from the Lord’s Supper and final excommunication, which was to take place after repeated admonitions. This article stipulates what these admonitions are to be.

It is common in matters of discipline to speak of “three steps of censure.” There is some disagreement, however, as to the meaning of the expression. Some interpret the three steps of censure to refer to the three admonitions which the consistory makes to the congregation and which are defined in Article 77. This is the position of VanDellen and Monsma in their *Commentary on the Church Order*. Others take the position that the three steps of censure refer to: 1) Suspension from the Lord’s Supper. 2) The three admonitions referred to in Article 77. 3) Final excommunication.

Part of the problem is the interpretation of Titus 3:10: "A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject." The "three admonitions" mentioned in the article undoubtedly refer to this passage in Titus. The third admonition is then the public announcement of excommunication.

The matter is one of terminology, and not of vital importance. It is, however, better to speak of the three steps of censure or discipline in the way in which I described above, and include the admonitions which the Church Order requires under the second step. The admonitions referred to in Titus are admonitions made to the congregation in the three announcements which are made to them and in which the congregation is admonished to pray for the sinner and point the sinner to his need for repentance.

Turning to the character of these admonitions, we may notice first of all in general:

- 1) They do not preclude private admonitions made to the sinner by the consistory in official visits. In fact, these private admonitions are specifically referred to in the article. These must continue throughout the entire process of discipline.
- 2) These public announcements which are made to the congregation are called by the article "admonitions" also. The idea is undoubtedly twofold:
 - a. The announcements are admonitions to the congregation itself on behalf of the sinner.
 - b. The announcements are indirect admonitions to the sinner, by informing the congregation of the sin which has been committed in their midst.
- 3) These admonitions include the following:
 - a. An explanation of the offense.
 - b. An explanation of the care bestowed on the sinner by the consistory.
 - c. This care bestowed on the sinner must be explained in connection with the reproof of his sin, his suspension from the Lord's Supper, and the repeated admonitions made to him. This need not be a detailed and itemized description of all the work which the consistory has done; but it must be sufficient to give the congregation a clear picture of the work.
 - d. An exhortation to the congregation to speak to the sinner and pray for him.

In particular, these announcements also differ from each other.

- 1) The first public admonition. In this admonition the name of the sinner is not mentioned "that he be somewhat spared." It has sometimes been objected that the congregation cannot pray for one whom they do not know by name. But this is not true. They may surely pray the Lord to remove the sin from the congregation by the repentance of the sinner.
- 2) The second public admonition. In this admonition, the name of the sinner is mentioned. But this can only be done with the advice of the classis. This advice of classis is referred to also in Article 76, but must be sought a second time just prior to excommunication. While this is surely not wrong, it is not necessary either. The advice of classis is sought once.

This advice of classis must be sought so that all possibility of partiality is guarded against. The consistory could become so enmeshed in a particular case that they are no longer able to look at a case with complete objectivity. The advice of classis is important.

Classis, before it passes judgment, must learn whether a sin has been committed, whether there is evidence of impenitence, whether Article 76 has been followed, whether the first admonition to the congregation has taken place, and if the labor of the consistory is sufficient. Classis must give its advice carefully, for it is giving the consistory its approval for excommunication if the sinner does not repent.

The proper procedure to be followed is not always understood. The consistory must not simply make a decision to seek the advice of classis on the matter of the second step of censure. This would not be proper and would still leave the whole matter in doubt as to the time when this second step is to be applied. Rather, the consistory must make a formal decision to proceed with the second step of censure. This decision must be with grounds. But its actual execution must await the approval of classis. If classis refuses its permission, the consistory will have to reconsider its decision or appeal to synod. The point is that the classis can only advise on formal discipline.

- 3) The third public admonition. This is a public announcement concerning the consistory's decision to proceed to the final remedy — excommunication. In this announcement the consistory informs the congregation of its determination to proceed with excommunication and informs the congregation of the date which has been set for this. This announcement must be made in order that the excommunication “may take place with the tacit approbation of the church.” The congregation must participate in this way in the work of the consistory.

If an objection is raised by a member of the congregation, the consistory must seriously consider such an objection. If the matter cannot be resolved between the objector and the consistory, the objector has the right to appeal to classis. Such an appeal would mean, under normal circumstances, that the excommunication would be held in abeyance pending the decisions of the broader ecclesiastical assemblies. Yet repeated appeals must never be permitted to frustrate the consistory in the exercise of their God-given work.

In each of these three announcements the consistory must prepare the announcement to be made. The time between the announcements shall be left to the consistory's judgment.

The third and final part of censure is actual excommunication (cf. Art. 76). This is the final exercise of the keys. It must be done according to the Form adopted for that purpose.

ARTICLE 78

Whenever anyone who has been excommunicated desires to become reconciled to the church in the way of repentance, it shall be announced to the congregation, either before the celebration of the Lord's Supper, or at some other opportune time, in order that (in as far as no one can mention anything against him to the contrary) he may with profession of his conversion be publicly reinstated, according to the form for that purpose.

In connection with the translation of this article from the Dutch, VanDellen and Monsma call attention to a phrase which has been elided. The original Dutch spoke of the fact that public reinstatement of the penitent sinner takes place “at the next celebration of the Lord’s Supper.” VanDellen and Monsma observe that the reason why this phrase was elided was probably because the announcement at the beginning of the Form for Readmittance speaks of readmittance taking place “either before the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, or at some other opportune time.” Regardless of the reason for the omission, the phrase should have been retained.

The article speaks of the reconciliation of those who have been excommunicated. It ought to be observed that the reason why the church has made provision for the readmission of excommunicated persons is not that the church admits the possibility of mistakes in the work of censure. This could not be. Officebearers, laboring in their office, conscious of their calling before Christ, do not make mistakes in the work of discipline. If a mistake is made it is only because of the fact that the whole church has been in whole or in part corrupted in doctrine, in the administration of the sacraments, and in the exercise of Christian discipline. A faithful church would not err in this matter. Rather, the reason is that the church can never make final disposition of the sinner with respect to his eternal state. Only God can do this. In this life there is always possibility of repentance — even after excommunication.

The procedure to be followed is defined by the article.

- 1) The sinner himself must express the desire to confess his sin and be restored to the fellowship of the church. He must give evidence to the consistory that he has repented and seeks forgiveness from his fellow saints from whose communion he has been cut off.
- 2) The consistory, after determining that the repentance of the sinner is genuine, must decide to restore him again to the fellowship of the church.
- 3) An announcement must be made to the congregation to this effect. This announcement is found at the beginning of the Form for Readmission, which confer.

The reason why such an announcement must be made to the congregation is that the congregation may give its tacit approbation. The congregation approved of the excommunication. It must also approve of his readmission. But if reconciliation is to be accomplished, the penitent sinner must be received into the fellowship of the church and restored to the communion of the faithful. The congregation must receive him when he seeks their fellowship once again.

If any member in the congregation brings an objection, this must be considered by the consistory and resolved with the individual before the consistory can proceed.

- 4) The readmittance itself takes place according to the form adopted for that purpose. It is preferable for this readmittance to take place just prior to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Since censure is begun with suspension from the Lord’s Supper, it is fitting that readmission take place when the sacrament is celebrated. But the announcement at the beginning of the form leaves room for exceptions.

It is possible that the person who has been excommunicated has moved and seeks re-admission in a different congregation. This is possible but only if such reconciliation take place in close cooperation with the consistory which excommunicated him and with its consent.

ARTICLES 79, 80

79. When ministers of the divine Word, elders, or deacons have committed any public, gross sin which is a disgrace to the church or worthy of punishment by the authorities, the elders and deacons shall immediately, by preceding sentence of the consistory thereof and of the nearest Church, be suspended or expelled from their office, but the ministers shall only be suspended. Whether these shall be entirely deposed from office shall be subject to the judgment of the classis, with the advice of the delegates of the synod mentioned in Article 11.

80. Furthermore, among the gross sins which are worthy of being punished with suspension or deposition from office, these are the principal ones: false doctrine or heresy, public schism, public blasphemy, simony, faithless desertion of office or intrusion upon that of another, perjury, adultery, fornication, theft, acts of violence, habitual drunkenness, brawling, filthy lucre; in short, all sins and gross offenses as render the perpetrators infamous before the world, and which in any private member of the church would be considered worthy of excommunication.

These two articles are treated together because they deal with the same matter — the discipline of officebearers. Before the contents of the articles are specifically studied, several general remarks are in order.

- 1) The articles do not speak specifically of the *discipline* of officebearers. Rather, the articles speak of procedure to be followed in removal of an officebearer from his office. The point is:
 - a. Strictly speaking, also removal from office is discipline. It is the statement of Christ that such a one is unworthy to function in the name of Christ in the church.
 - b. Removal from office must necessarily be followed by further discipline as outlined in Articles 75-78.
- 2) Because removal from office through deposition belongs to the sphere of discipline, this also is the proper work of the consistory, which is appointed to have the rule over its own officebearers. There has been considerable controversy concerning this (cf. VanDellen and Monsma, pp. 327-329; the history of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in 1942; our own history in 1924). The fact of the matter is, nevertheless, that no classis or synod may suspend or depose from office. This is the work of the consistory itself. And this is the work of the consistory because it is part of the exercise of the keys.
- 3) In the third place, the censure of officebearers is a serious matter just because officebearers function in the name of Christ clothed with Christ's authority. Paul stipulates, in I

Timothy 5:19, that no accusation may be brought against an elder except in the mouth of two or three witnesses. Any charges against an officebearer must be thoroughly investigated.

- 4) If an officebearer is deposed from office but repents of his sin he must not be further censured. He may become unworthy, through his sin, to hold an office in the church of Christ, but repentance makes further censure impossible (for further discussion of this, cf. below).

The two articles speak first of all of sins worthy of suspension and deposition. Article 79 speaks of “public, gross sin, which is a disgrace to the church, or worthy of punishment by the authorities.” Article 80 lists these sins. Concerning these sins in general we may note:

- 1) The sins of which the Church Order speaks are gross, not from the viewpoint of God to whom all sins are gross, but from the viewpoint of the church over which these officebearers rule. They are “public, gross” sins. They are sins which require punishment from the civil magistrates. They are sins which bring disgrace upon the church. That is, they are sins which are an occasion for the ungodly to slander and which bring evil upon the holy name of Christ to whom the church belongs.
- 2) Article 80 mentions also that these sins are sins “which in any private member of the church would be considered worthy of excommunication.”
- 3) We may mention in this connection that private sins committed by an officebearer but repented of need not be reason for suspension or deposition unless the sin be of such a kind that it makes him unworthy to hold the office which has been entrusted to him. Such a sin would be a direct violation of the qualifications of office mentioned in various passages of Scripture. In this case, the deposition would have to be announced to the congregation, along with the reasons for deposition and the fact that the sin has been confessed.

Concerning the particular sins mentioned in Article 80, we must notice first of all that the list is not intended to be exhaustive. The sins mentioned in that article are the chief ones, the direct violations of the law of God and of the principles of the kingdom of Christ.

A few remarks concerning each sin mentioned are in order.

- 1) False doctrine or heresy. Such sins as these would be violations of the promise made at the time the Formula of Subscription was signed. The sins are deliberate and conscious perversions of the truth contained in the confessions of the church.
- 2) Public schism. The sin of public schism is the sin of dividing the congregation or the churches into factions, arousing the people of God to discord or mutiny. The motives may be those of self-justification or defiance of authority in the church or desire for personal self-advancement and the like.
- 3) Public blasphemy. Irreverent scorning of things holy and sacred and mocking of that which is of God and His Word.
- 4) Simony. Attempt to gain an office in the church or to sell an office for money.
- 5) Faithless desertion of office. Forsaking and refusing to perform the duties of the office to which one is called.

- 6) Intrusion upon (the office) of another. Attempting to labor in the office without a proper call or to labor in the congregation where God has called others.
- 7) Perjury. Lying under oath either in the civil courts, in relation to one's neighbor, or in the church of Christ.
- 8) Adultery. Violation of the marriage ordinances of Scripture.
- 9) Fornication. Any sexual uncleanness.
- 10) Theft. Appropriating that which belongs to another.
- 11) Acts of violence. Any kind of action by physical strength or mere brute force.
- 12) Habitual drunkenness. Repeated drinking in excess.
- 13) Brawling. Quarrelling, fighting, etc.
- 14) Filthy lucre. Dishonest gain and pursuit of dishonest gain.

Article 79 speaks particularly of the procedure to be followed in the censure of officebearers, including both suspension and deposition.

Suspension and deposition belong to the discipline of officebearers in distinction from the discipline of members in the church for the following reasons:

- 1) Because officebearers hold special offices in which they exercise the authority of Christ, and because a gross sin makes them unworthy to labor on behalf of Christ in the church, they must be removed from their offices in an official way.
- 2) Because of the sacredness of the office which they hold and the importance of the offices in the church, unfaithful officebearers cannot continue in these offices.
- 3) Sin makes it impossible for officebearers to represent Christ, to serve as an example to the flock, to warn the flock of the ways of sin.

Four distinct situations are suggested in Article 79.

- 1) The suspension of elders and deacons. The article speaks of the fact that such suspension must take place "immediately." This does not mean that sinning officebearers must be suspended even before proper investigation is carried out. Rather, the word "immediately" refers to the distinction between the censure of elders and deacons on the one hand and ministers on the other. In the case of ministers, the process is somewhat longer (cf. below). Nevertheless, if an officebearer makes himself unworthy of the office, he must be immediately suspended.

This suspension is not necessary in the case of elders and deacons. The article states: "...the elders and deacons shall immediately ... be suspended or expelled from their office...." The consistory itself must decide whether to suspend first and depose later or to proceed immediately with deposition. The determining factor will be whether the sin is of such a kind that, even should the sinner repent, he is unworthy to hold the office. In that case, deposition can take place immediately without suspension intervening.

Such suspension must have the approval of the nearest consistory. No consistory may act alone. The reason for this is because the matter of suspension and deposition is so se-

rious that another consistory must concur to avoid the possibility of mistakes. The procedure to be followed is:

- a. The consistory responsible makes a decision to suspend dependent upon the approval of the nearest consistory.
- b. That consistory is notified and meets with the consistory in charge. The whole case must be discussed, so that the consistory called in is thoroughly acquainted with the case and can make an intelligent decision.
- c. The consistory called in then meets separately and comes to its decision.
- d. If there is disagreement which cannot be resolved, the matter must go to classis.
- e. If the suspension is approved, an announcement is made to that effect to the congregation.

Suspension means a temporary barring from active functioning in the office. An officebearer cannot, under suspension, perform the duties of his office in any respect.

It is interesting to note that the early synods of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands did not require a consistory to seek the approval of the nearest church. This was doubtless because our fathers zealously guarded the independence of each autonomous congregation. The provision was added by the Synod of Middelburg in 1581.

- 2) The deposition of elders and deacons. As noted above, deposition can, under certain circumstances, take place without prior suspension. It is also possible that an officebearer is suspended, but, failing to repent, is deposed from office. In the case an officebearer was first suspended and then deposed, the approval of the nearest consistory need not be sought at the time of deposition, since it was gained at the time of suspension. If an officebearer is deposed, this can be done only with the approval of the nearest consistory. The procedure to be followed is, in all other respects, the same. When an officebearer is deposed from office, he holds that office no longer.
- 3) Suspension of ministers. Ministers may not be immediately deposed from office. Their suspension must come first. This suspension can take place only with the approval of the nearest consistory, as in the case of elders and deacons. The procedure to be followed is in all other respects similar to the procedure followed in the case of other officebearers, with the exception that the other consistories within the denomination must be notified. This latter is to inform the other consistories that the minister is ineligible to perform the duties of his office. The other Consistories are not asked in this notification to approve; they are simply informed. They must recognize this suspension.
- 4) The deposition of ministers. Before a consistory can finally depose a minister, the matter must go to classis. At the classis the synodical delegates must be present. Before the consistory can actually proceed to deposition, the approval of the classis and the synodical delegates must be gained. The reason for this is that the minister, from a certain point of view, belongs to the whole denomination. The churches in common had a voice in declaring him candidate for the ministry. The churches in common must speak and voice their consent before deposition can take place. If there is disagreement, the matter must be resolved by synod.

Finally, attention is called to some particular matters.

- 1) If the officebearer does not repent, suspension and/or deposition must be followed by regular censure proceedings.
 - 2) The question is sometimes asked whether an officebearer who is deposed from office and who repents can be ordained once again at some future time into the same or another office. There is no hard and fast answer to this question. The nature of the sin and the circumstances must determine the answer. In some cases it is clearly advisable that a deposed officebearer be not again ordained into office. An illustration of this is an officebearer who has revealed a definite weakness which makes it impossible for him to serve at any time in the future. If he should become eligible for office after his deposition, this should only be after a period of time has elapsed. It is not, generally speaking, advisable to ordain an officebearer into office after a short period of time has elapsed since his deposition.
 - 3) Emeriti ministers, since they continue to hold their office, although they do not actively perform the duties of the office, are also subject to suspension and deposition.
 - 4) A minister, while under suspension, is the financial responsibility of his congregation. His deposition, however, marks the end of this financial responsibility.
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ARTICLE 81

The ministers of the Word, elders, and deacons shall before the celebration of the Lord's Supper exercise Christian censure among themselves, and in a friendly spirit admonish one another with regard to the discharge of their office.

This article, which deals with what is usually called *censura morum* or “censure of conduct,” has a rather peculiar history. Calvin was the first to introduce such mutual censure among officebearers in the church in Geneva. The practice was soon adopted in the Reformed Churches of the Lowlands under the influence of à Lasco. The Synod of Dordt, meeting in 1578, was the first to provide for it. However, this synod stipulated that such censure must deal with “the doctrine and life” of the officebearers. The Synod of ’s Gravenhage, in 1586, omitted the words “doctrine and life” and substituted the words found in our present version: “with regard to the discharge of their office.” It was also at this time that the phrase “before the celebration of the Lord’s Supper” was dropped from the article. To this day the churches in the Netherlands have omitted the reference to the Lord’s Supper. However, when the Church Order was prepared in this country in 1914, the Christian Reformed Church returned to the practice followed in the years prior to 1586 and reinserted the reference to the Lord’s Supper. Why this was done is not known. VanDellen and Monsma suggest that the reason was that *censura morum* be carried out at least four times a year.

It is clear, however, from this history that *censura morum* is not intended to be a censure of conduct in relation to the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The purpose is quite different. In churches with a hierarchical form of church government, higher clergy exercise supervision over lower clergy. But this has always been abhorrent to the Reformed churches. All officebearers are equal in authority and in the position they occupy in the church of Christ. Hence, the Church Order provides for a mutual supervision of the officebearers over each other (cf. Arts. 16 and 23). This article, along with others in the Church Order, provides for such mutual supervision.

It is also clear from the history of this article that *censura morum* was not intended to deal with the doctrine and life of the officebearers. The reason is obvious. If an officebearer errs in doctrine or in life, the matter cannot wait until the time for *censura morum*. Such errors are, according to Article 80, grounds for suspension and deposition. Rather, this censure of conduct has to do with the discharge of each officebearer's office. It is an opportunity for the officebearers mutually to exercise supervision over each other and to admonish each other with respect to this one aspect of their calling in the church.

The article does not define the method to be followed. This is left to the judgment of the consistories. Several methods have been followed in the past.

- 1) Each officebearer, one by one, is sent out while the remaining officebearers discuss his work. If there are any criticisms of it, he is informed upon his return.
- 2) The question is put to the entire consistory and, if there are no responses, it is assumed that there is no criticism.
- 3) The question is put to the consistory as a whole, and each officebearer is asked to respond individually.
- 4) In some consistories, after *censura morum* has been conducted, the members of the consistory shake hands with each other.

It is apparent that, on the one hand, such mutual supervision is important in the church and must be carried out freely and openly; and, on the other hand, that it must always be done in a spirit of love and forbearance. Only then will the church prosper.

ARTICLE 82

To those who remove from the congregation, a letter or testimony concerning their profession and conduct shall be given by the consistory, signed by two; or, in the case of letters which are given under the seal of the church, signed by one.

The article dealing with the transfer of membership was written in the context of established congregational boundaries. If a person, a member in one congregation, moved beyond the boundaries of that congregation into an area of another congregation, he was obligated to secure a transfer in membership. We have no such boundaries in this country. Nevertheless, people who move from one place to another often find it necessary to affiliate with another congregation nearer their new residence. This article describes the procedure to be followed in that event.

Article 61 of the Church Order also dealt with this matter. However, that article dealt with the question from the viewpoint of admission to the Lord's table: "None shall be admitted to the Lord's Supper ... besides being reputed to be of a godly work, without which those who come from other churches shall not be admitted." This article speaks of the procedure to be followed in the actual transfer of membership.

Our churches have three forms which are used for this purpose (cf. the Church Order Book). One form is the one used in the transfer of baptized members. This form is used only when such a baptized member is transferring separately from his parents. If he transfers with his parents, his name is included on their transfer certificate. The second form is the one used in the transfer

of confessing members. The third form is a certificate of dismissal. This form is used when members transfer to a congregation of another denomination.

The question has often been asked whether transfer papers must be sent to the individual or to the consistory under whose supervision the one transferring shall presently come. The article itself suggests strongly that the paper must be given to the individual: "To those who remove from the congregation, a letter or testimony ... shall be given." However, our transfer forms are addressed directly to a particular consistory and are, evidently, intended to be sent directly to a consistory. This discrepancy should be cleared up at some future time. The point is, however, that a member has the right to his own papers and may ask that they be delivered personally to him. But there is no wrong in the transfer papers being sent directly to a consistory, especially if the member himself should request this — as ordinarily he would do.

Such a member, while in the process of transferring, remains a member of the consistory which issues the transfer until the transfer is completed. A certificate is attached to the transfer papers which stipulates: "The certificate of _____ from the _____ Protestant Reformed Church has been duly received and accepted...." Notice: "The above mentioned shall be considered still a member of the _____ Protestant Reformed Church until this receipt is returned properly signed." He remains under the supervision and government of his original consistory until this process is finished.

Sometimes it happens that a member moves away from a congregation without asking for his membership to be transferred. In this event the consistory must do all in its power to contact him either directly, through correspondence, or through a sister consistory in the area where the individual has moved. He must be admonished of his waywardness and treated if he refuses to alter his life. But if all efforts at contact prove unsuccessful, he will have to be removed from the membership of the church.

The testimony which is sent to the individual or to a sister congregation is concerning the member's "profession and conduct." The transfer asserts that such a one is faithful in his confession and faithful in his walk. The consistory receiving the transfer is, by virtue of the church federation, obligated to acknowledge this testimonial. If a member transfers while he is being censured, such notification of censure must be included with the papers, along with the grounds for censure. The consistory to whom the transfer is sent must also recognize this censure and must continue to labor with such an individual.

Only the consistory, by formal decision, can send such a transfer. This may not be done by the minister or even by the minister and the clerk or some individual elder. The article stipulates that the testimony "shall be given by the consistory, signed by two; or, in the case of letters which are given under the seal of the church, signed by one." The Christian Reformed Church dropped the latter provision in 1939.

ARTICLE 83

Furthermore, to the poor, removing for sufficient reasons, so much money for traveling shall be given by the deacons as they deem adequate. The consistory and the deacons shall, however, see to it that they be not too much inclined to relieve their churches of the poor, with whom they would without necessity burden other churches.

This article arose out of conditions peculiar to the Low Countries in the early history of the Reformed churches. Many of the people who belonged to the Reformed churches were very poor and moved from place to place hoping to find work to earn sufficient to support their families. Sometimes these people were forced to flee because of persecution and would have to leave all their earthly possessions behind to escape with their lives. But while in many instances people moved for these reasons, there were also tramps and bums who moved from place to place feigning that they were members of the Reformed churches and asserting that they too were fleeing persecution. These would also seek the help of deaconates in various churches and make off with money which rightly belonged to Christ's poor. An additional problem which arose was that some, although faithful members of the church, thought they could better themselves financially by moving when, as a matter of fact, moving simply aggravated their poverty and made matters worse. This put unnecessary burdens on deaconates. All these conditions led to the formation of this article.

Quite obviously, the poor of the church had to be helped if their reasons for moving were valid. Already the Synod of Emden (1571) made provisions for such poor. But because of the ever-present danger of giving money to transients who did not deserve such money, Emden decided that each individual had to receive an attestation from the consistory from which he was moving to prove that he was a faithful member of the church. Further, Emden also provided for a close and detailed examination of one's faith if one asserted that he was unable to attain such an attestation because persecution had forced him to flee hurriedly. This attestation had to include such information as the individual's name, native country, occupation, reason for moving, and various other similar items. As an individual moved through the territory of a church, that church would help such a one as long as he remained in its territory and put on the attestation the amount of money given. Upon arriving in the territory of another congregation, the attestation could be given to the consistory of that church. It is clear from all this that, while the church was eager to help her poor, the churches in common took considerable pains to see to it that the money did not fall into the hands of the undeserving.

The ruling that the amount given to an individual by a church be put on the papers continued in the Netherlands up to 1905 and in this country until the revision of 1914.

The article, while no longer of such importance as it once was, does still make provisions for assistance to be given to the poor when they move from one place to another to aid them in their traveling. But the article states that such help be given:

- 1) Only when the poor move for sufficient reasons. It is conceivable that the poor, supported by the church, only have an idea that they can better earn a living in another part of the country because "the grass looks greener on the other side of the fence." But there is no objective reason to suppose this. The deacons themselves must decide whether the reasons for moving are adequate. And only if the reasons are sufficient shall help be given.
- 2) In the amount the deacons consider adequate. It is the prerogative of the deacons to determine how much money shall be given to any individual or family moving. It may be necessary to provide not only money for traveling, but also sufficient money to help the family become settled in a new locality.

There is also a warning attached to the article. There is always the possibility that a deaconate, burdened with the support of many poor, encourages some of the poor to move when there is no good reason for it other than to escape the responsibility of supporting the poor. The article warns strongly against this. Not only must the deacons see to it that this is not done; but the consistory itself, responsible for the supervision of the deacons, must also see to it that this danger is avoided. The viewpoint of the article is that the work of mercy in the church is a blessing, not a burden.

If a person, for reasons of health or other inadequate reasons, moves away from the vicinity of the churches of which he is a member, he shall not be assisted. He must be shown that his obligations to the church and his calling to remain a member of the true church supercede all other obligations.

If a member of one congregation moves to the area of another congregation and affiliates with it in order to receive special treatment at a hospital, arrangements must be made between the deaconates of the congregations involved for his support.

ARTICLE 84

No church shall in any way lord it over other churches, no minister over other ministers, no elder or deacon over other elders or deacons.

This article is based upon one of the fundamental principles of Reformed church polity. It was considered so important that it was the first article adopted by the Convention of Wezel — although that article was in different form. At the Synod of Emden (1571) the article as we now have it was principally adopted.

We have already spoken of this principle in connection with other articles in the Church Order and we need not reiterate here what has already been said. The fundamental principle underlying this article is the autonomy of the local congregation. The Reformed churches were deeply convinced that Scripture teaches that each congregation is a complete manifestation of the body of Christ. Christ rules, through the ordained officebearers, over His people in each individual congregation. From this it follows that there must be equality — equality between individual and autonomous congregations, and equality between all officebearers. This principle was directly opposed by the hierarchical church polity of the Romish church. From the beginning of the Episcopal system as it developed in the Romish church, one congregation lorded it over another congregation, one officebearer over another officebearer. Against this our fathers revolted. And this article was incorporated into the Church Order to warn emphatically against anything of this sort creeping into the Reformed churches.

VanDellen and Monsma suggest that it is quite possible that this article has historical roots within the Reformed churches themselves. They suggest that some of the churches (especially the Churches Under the Cross) were fearful lest broader assemblies such as classes and synods would compromise this principle and lead to hierarchy. For this reason they were reluctant to cooperate in such movements of federation. And this article was incorporated into the Church Order to allay such fears.

However that may be, the article contains a principle very dear to the hearts of all Reformed men. It is a principle which must be zealously guarded. Because each congregation (whether large or small) is a complete manifestation of the body of Christ, all congregations are equal in the federation of churches and none has the right to lord it over any other congregation. The same is true of officebearers. All ministers are equal in authority and no minister may lord it over any other minister. All elders and deacons are equal and none may lord it over any other officebearer, either in his own congregation or in another. While the article does not assert this in so many words, it follows from all this that no minister may lord it over an elder or deacon, and *vice versa* as well. All officebearers, occupying their own offices, are also equal in authority, each manifesting the authority of Christ in the way peculiar to the office he occupies.

ARTICLE 85

Churches whose usages differ from ours merely in nonessentials shall not be rejected.

Historically this article of the Church Order was a reference to the relationships which existed between different denominations and not to the relationships between churches of the same denomination. The Synod of Dordt in 1578 spoke in general of “other churches”; but the Synod of Middelburg in 1581 spoke definitely of “foreign churches.” This latter expression is retained in the Netherlands up to the present. In this country the word “foreign” was dropped because the Reformed churches here desired to seek contact with other Reformed churches within the confines of the United States as well as with Reformed churches in other countries.

By the word “non-essentials” the Church Order refers to aspects of the life of the church which are not emphatically prescribed by God’s Word. The Church Order recognizes, on the one hand, that the church of Christ throughout the world is united in the truth of her confession, which is derived from Scripture; in the celebration of the sacraments as prescribed by Scripture; in the exercise of discipline as defined by God’s Word; and in liturgical practices as these are controlled by the Rule of Scripture. But, on the other hand, the Church Order recognizes that the church of Christ must develop in each land, among each people, in each culture in its own unique way, and that each congregation must seek always the edification of the people of God within the area where Christ has called it to manifest the body of Christ. This does not permit variation where Scripture gives the rule of faith; but it does permit variation where Scripture does not lay down specific rules. These “non-essentials,” therefore, refer to all such matters with which Scripture does not deal. No doubt, originally the Church Order referred particularly to various liturgical practices. The key word was the Latin *litibus*, which means “rites.” But the article refers to all practices which must be determined by the consistory in connection with all the liturgical practices of the church. From time to time the Church Order has called attention to some of these matters which are left to the discretion of the individual churches (cf., e.g., Art. 62). Some other such practices would include whether the congregation worships in the morning and afternoon of a Sabbath day or in the morning and evening; how often the Lord’s Supper is celebrated other than the required four times a year; the order of worship, etc.

Churches must *not be rejected* if they are one with us in all other matters except matters which are “non-essential.” This refers, as noted above, to relations between denominations here and abroad. But it surely also refers to individual congregations which seek admittance into the fellowship of our churches.

The principle underlying this article is both negative and positive. The positive is that the unity of the church must be expressed, as much as possible, in institutional form. But this unity is a unity in Christ, and therefore a unity founded upon Scripture and the confessions (including the so-called lesser confessions). The negative is (and this is worthy of close observation in this falsely ecumenical age) that where differences are on essential matters of doctrine and faith, such churches cannot unite, for they cannot express the unity of Christ.

The question sometimes arises in this connection whether it is proper to worship in churches with which our churches do not agree. In answer to this, Rev. Ophoff has written in his notes on church polity: “Our Reformed fathers, being men of principle, took the stand that this is forbidden. Their stand was that attending divine services of such churches is equivalent to pronouncing doctrinal differences ‘adiophora,’ and is thus to weaken one’s own position. This was the stand of the Reformed fathers, a stand they took in the very article with which we are here occupied.”

ARTICLE 86

These articles, relating to the lawful order of the church, have been so drafted and adopted by common consent that they (if the profit of the churches demand otherwise) may and ought to be altered, augmented, or diminished. However, no particular congregation or classis shall be at liberty to do so, but they shall show all diligence in observing them, until it be otherwise ordained by the general synod.

This article was adopted, in substantially the same form as we now have it, by the Synod of Middelburg in 1581. It was already, as far as the general thrust of the article is concerned, appended to all the decisions of the Convention of Wezel. It is an article which differs in content with the preceding articles. The others lay down specific principles and rules for the church. This article deals with the Church Order as a whole and its place and importance in the church.

There has been some dispute concerning the meaning of the word “church” in the phrase “...relating to the lawful order of the church...” Some have maintained that this refers to the universal body of Christ. Others maintain that it refers to the church as an institute in the midst of the world. It appears as if the latter is correct. The article is speaking of the lawful order of the church; hence, it must refer to the manifestation of the church of Christ in her institutional form in the world. It is true that the singular (church) is used instead of the plural. But this is undoubtedly because the reference is to the institutional manifestation of Christ’s church.

The article mentions once again (cf. Art. 1) that the purpose of the Church Order is the “*lawful order* of the church.” We need not elaborate further on this here. For a discussion of this point, confer the notes on Article 1.

Secondly, the article speaks of the fact that these articles were drafted and adopted by common consent. This refers, of course, to their original adoption by the Synod of Dordrecht in 1618-'19. But whatever Reformed church accepts these articles agrees also with the decisions of the Dordrecht Synod relating to the lawful order of the church. The articles were not imposed upon the churches in any hierarchical fashion. Rather, the articles arose out of the organic life of the church. Mutually, in the ecclesiastical assemblies, the churches discussed, drafted, decided upon, and accepted these various rules and principles.

Nevertheless, they were drafted and adopted that they may and ought to be altered, augmented, or diminished if necessary. Concerning this we ought to notice, first of all, that our fathers did not draft and adopt these articles with the idea that they were to be placed on a par with Scripture as far as authority is concerned. Their authority is derived from Scripture. Thus they are subject to amendment. Secondly, this does not refer to all the articles of the Church Order in the same way. Some articles lay down fundamental principles of Scripture. These too, can be altered, but only when it is shown that they conflict with Scripture. Other articles deal with more practical matters in the church. These can be altered at any time. Thirdly, the article limits these amendments by the qualification: "if the profit of the churches demand otherwise." The plural "churches" must be noticed. It is not the profit of an individual congregation which can determine this. The alteration may be made only when the whole federation of churches will profit from the change.

The article also speaks of the procedure to be followed if changes are to be made. Concerning this we may notice:

- 1) No congregation, classis, or particular synod may make such alterations on its own. Strictly speaking, the Church Order belongs to all the Reformed churches which have adopted it; and not even ought one Reformed denomination proceed to change without consultation with the other Reformed bodies. But this has generally been ignored in our day. At least, only the broadest ecclesiastical assembly of a denomination is empowered to make necessary changes. The Church Order has been adopted by mutual consent; it can also be changed only by mutual consent.
- 2) Such changes would have to come to synod via an overture which originated with an individual consistory or classis. But it would have to come to synod in the ecclesiastical way.
- 3) No changes ought to be made hastily. This ought especially to be emphasized in our day when the old is despised, and change is brought about for the mere sake of change. The Dutch proverb is much to the point in this connection: *Alle verandering is geen verbetering*, i.e., "Every change is not improvement." Changes which are proposed ought to be considered carefully. This is true especially when specific changes are brought to the consistory, classis, and synod. At each point in the ecclesiastical process, these changes ought to be discussed and studied before synod itself makes final disposition of the matter. As much as possible, discussion of changes ought to involve the whole church and arise out of the church. Nevertheless, that our present Church Order is in need of changes to bring it up to date is obvious. And such alterations ought to be considered.

Finally, the article speaks of the fact that the Church Order must be diligently observed. The churches have adopted the Church Order by common consent. As long as the articles remain unchanged, they must be observed. This point, too, ought to be emphasized. Our age is careless

and profane with respect to authority. Let not this disrespect for authority characterize the church of Christ, so that the Church Order becomes a dead book and lawlessness prevail in the church of Christ.

References

References relative action by the synods on translation of the Church Order, compilation of by-laws, gathering of related material, and publication of same:

Synod of 1943 — Articles 61, 64, 65, 71, 75, 76; Agenda, p. 81.

Synod of 1944 — Articles 59, 61-68, Suppl. XIV.

Synod of 1945 — Articles 41, 51-57, 66.

Synod of 1946 — Articles 17, 19.

Synod of 1959 — Article 23, Suppl. V.

Synod of 1960 — Articles 23, 27, 28, Suppl. XII.

Synod of 1961 — Article 18, Suppl. VI.

Synod of 1977 — Article 79.

Synod of 1981 — Article 47.

Synod of 1983 — Article 37.

Synod of 1987 — Article 41.

Synod of 1996 — Article 69.

Synod of 1999 — Article 48.

Synod of 2002 — Article 51.

