

DAILY MEDITATIONS ON THE BELGIC CONFESSION

by pastors of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America

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OCT
Articles 28-31

Article 28: Every One is Bound to Join Himself to the True Church.

We believe, since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and out of it there is no salvation, that no person, of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw himself to live in a separate state from it; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it, maintaining the unity of the church; submitting themselves to the doctrine and discipline thereof; bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ; and as mutual members of the same body, serving to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given them.

And that this may be the more effectually observed, it is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the church, and to join themselves to this congregation wheresoever God hath established it, even though the magistrates and edicts of princes be against it, yea, though they should suffer death or any other corporal punishment. Therefore all those who separate themselves from the same, or do not join themselves to it, act contrary to the ordinance of God.

**October 2 – Salvation Only in the Church Institute
by Rev. Daniel Kleyn**

Read: Ephesians 4:11-12, Psalms 133 & 134

Art. 28 makes a bold statement concerning the church, namely, that “out of it there is no salvation.”

What does this mean? Is Art. 28 referring to the church from the viewpoint of the universal body of Christ? No, that is not the case. This is clear from the fact that Art. 28 states that the believer has a duty to “join himself” to a true church. And we do not join ourselves to the universal body of Christ – God did that in His eternal decree of election.

Art. 28 is speaking of the church institute. It has in mind the church as an organized congregation in a specific location. And Art. 28 teaches that there is no salvation outside the church institute. In order to be saved, one must join a true church of Christ.

Why is this the case? Why is it so important for the child of God to be a member of such a church? The reason is because Christ has given the means of grace to the church institute. You will not find the means of grace (the preaching and the sacraments) anywhere else. They are found only in a true and faithful church of Christ. And it is only in such a church that the Spirit of Christ works, through the means of grace (especially the preaching), to save our souls.

Someone may say, “But is that really true? Is it really necessary to be a member of a church in order to be saved? Do you mean to say that God cannot and does not save people who are not members of a local church?”

Our answer to these questions is this: “It is not a matter of what God is able to do, but simply a matter of what God has willed to do. God teaches us in His Word that He has decided to save His people by means of their being members in the church institute.”

Therefore, there is no substitute for membership in a local church. Corporate worship with the people of God cannot be replaced by “home worship,” or by “small group” Bible studies. We need to join a true church of Christ, for we need to hear the faithful preaching of the gospel, which is the power of God that saves (Rom 1:16, 10:13-15). We need to be in a true church, for “this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved.”

All of this is beautifully expressed in Psalms 133 and 134. These psalms speak of “Zion” (the church) and of God’s people standing in “the house of the LORD.” These psalms also mention the oil of anointing, which represents the Holy Spirit at work in the faithful, instituted church of Christ. Finally, these two psalms point out that Jehovah blesses His people “out of Zion.” It is in Zion that Jehovah “commanded His blessing” upon His people, even “life for evermore.” Salvation is not found outside the church, but within the walls of Zion.

“Such love in peace and joy distils, As o’er the slopes of Hermon’s hills Refreshing dew descends; The Lord commands His blessing there, And they that walk in love shall share In life that never ends” (Psalm 133, Psalter #370).

**October 3 – Called to be Members of the Church
by Rev. Daniel Kleyn**

Read: Psalm 87, Hebrews 10:25

Because there is no salvation outside the church institute, the child of God has a calling to join himself to a true church of Christ. “No person, of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw himself to live in a separate state from it; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it.” It is the duty of every believer to be a member.

Church membership is not optional for us. It is not something we decide to do (or not do) depending on how much we think we need it (or don't need it), how much we like a particular congregation, how personable the pastor is, or how friendly the members are. Regardless of all these things, it is our duty to join.

Not only do we have the duty to join, but we also have the duty not to separate ourselves from a true church. This has clear biblical warrant in Heb 10:25, where we are commanded not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together.

One may be tempted to leave a church for various earthly reasons. Young people may be tempted to do so for the sake of college, work, voluntary service in the military, marriage, or a more suitable place to live. But a child of God may not wilfully leave a true church – either temporarily or permanently. His duty is to remain an active member in that church.

Reformed churches and Reformed believers must have a high view of church membership. Earthly choices, earthly goals, and earthly needs must never take precedence. What must always come first is obedience to the command of Christ to be a member in a church in which is found (more clearly than in any other church) the three marks of a faithful church of Christ – the pure preaching of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and the proper exercise of Christian discipline (Art. 29). The child of God must never wilfully separate himself from that church.

The reason we must take our church membership so seriously is that it is necessary for our salvation. It is in a true church of Christ that the Spirit works to save us through the preaching of the gospel. Church membership ought to be as important to us as the forgiveness of sins, the comfort of our hearts, the joy of our salvation, and the hope of eternal life. And this is important not only for ourselves personally, but also for our families. We need to be members for the sake of the salvation of our children and grandchildren.

If someone either refuses to join a true church, or else abandons it, in reality he is saying, “The salvation of my soul, and of the souls of my loved ones, is insignificant and unimportant to me. Earthly things are far more necessary for me to have and pursue.”

May God preserve us from ever having such a careless attitude toward our salvation, and thus toward membership in a true church of Christ.

“When the Lord shall count the nations, Sons and daughters He shall see, Born to endless life in Zion, And their joyful song shall be, ‘Blessed Zion, Blessed Zion, All our fountains are in thee’” (Psalm 87, Psalter #238).

October 4 – A Member in Spite of Persecution
by Rev. Daniel Kleyn

Read: Daniel 3:1-18, Acts 4:13-29, Acts 5:27-29

Membership in a true church of Christ is not always easy. Sometimes a very high price must be paid by the faithful member of a true church. But in spite of that, the child of God is called to join that church, and always to remain a member. Why? Because he must obey God, rather than men.

Some of our fellow believers around the world face severe consequences for gathering together as a church in order to worship God. The government forbids it. Earthly rulers threaten them with extreme punishments. If they disobey, they can expect severe persecution, including imprisonment and even death.

Other children of God face milder forms of persecution. Parents threaten to disown children who abandon their pagan beliefs and join a faithful church of Christ. Family members mock a parent or child or sibling who lets nothing detain him from being in church twice every Lord's Day. Former friends ridicule and do all they can to make life miserable for the believer who manifests his undying love for and devotion to Christ and His church.

Such suffering for the sake of Christ ought not surprise us. We can expect it, for unto us "it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake" (Phil 1:29). The world hated Christ and put Him to death. The world will do the same to those who belong to Christ and who confess His name (John 15:18).

But "even though the magistrates and edicts of princes were against it, yea, though [we] should suffer death or any other corporal punishment," we must never abandon Christ's church. Always we must obey God rather than men.

That means we must never separate ourselves from the church out of fear of what our earthly rulers might do to us. We must never stop attending a true church because the result will be constant mockery from those who are dear to us. We must ever remain faithful in our attendance, even if the earthly welfare, not only of ourselves, but also of our own family is at stake. Even if we might lose all our earthly possessions, earthly friendships, earthly peace, and even earthly life itself, still we must remain faithful members of a true church of Christ.

Why is this necessary? For the sake of our salvation. We need to be in church every Lord's Day so our souls are fed with the bread of heaven. We must allow nothing to keep us from that.

But we do all this with confident trust and hope in God and Christ. We know that nothing (not mockery, hatred, imprisonment, or even death) will separate us from Christ and His love. We know that we are more than conquerors through Christ, and will always have the victory. Yes, even death will be victory.

May this be our confession and song: "The Lord with me, I will not fear Tho' human might oppose; The Lord my helper, I shall be Triumphant o'er my foes. ... The Lord hath helped and kept me safe When foes were fierce and strong; The Lord my Saviour is become, He is my strength and song" (Psalm 118, Psalter #317).

**October 5 – A Member Who Submits to Christ
by Rev. Daniel Kleyn**

Read: Psalm 110, Matthew 11:15-30

Art. 28 mentions an important characteristic (and duty) of the faithful members of a true church: “bowing their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ.”

This points to the fact that as members of the body of Christ, we not only confess that Jesus is our Savior, but also this: “Jesus is our Lord!” He is the supreme Head of His church, and thus Lord over all the members of that church.

As Art. 28 points out, the duty to bow our necks to the yoke of Christ means especially two things: we submit to the doctrine of the church, and we submit to the discipline of the church. We do this, not simply because it is the doctrine and discipline of the church itself, but because it is the doctrine and discipline of Christ.

Submission to the doctrine of the church means submitting to all the truths of the Word of God. That includes not only the Bible itself, but also the whole body of truth as it is set forth in our Reformed confessions. We must submit to all the truth, for it is the truth that makes us free (John 8:32).

But submission to the doctrine of the church means submission especially to the preaching. That is crucial, for the true preaching of the Word of God saves. When that Word is faithfully preached, Christ Himself preaches. His voice is heard in His church, and by His people. And that voice is powerful to regenerate, to justify, to turn from sin, to sanctify, and to preserve us in our salvation.

He who fails to submit to the doctrine of Christ in a true church not only commits the sin of refusing to submit to Christ, but also does it to the peril of his own soul.

Secondly, submission to the yoke of Christ means that we submit to the discipline of the church. Christ has appointed certain men in His church (the elders) to watch for our souls (Heb 13:17). When elders faithfully carry out their work, Christ Himself does that work. If a believer errs in doctrine or life, it is not merely a few men who come to visit him and speak to him, but Christ visits, Christ admonishes, and Christ calls him to repentance. We must submit to Him.

If we are outside the church, we will be without the care of the preaching and elders. We need that care, for we all stray. If we are not members of a true church, who will correct us?

When we make a public confession of faith, we make promises regarding our submission. We say, “I promise to adhere to the doctrine that is taught here in this Christian church.” And, “I promise to submit to church government and to church discipline”.

This is a serious promise. It is a solemn vow made before God Himself. May He strengthen us to be faithful in keeping it.

But let us remember, too, that it is a delight to submit to Christ, for His rule over His people is a rule of grace. He makes His people willing in the day of His power (Psa 110:3). His yoke is easy, and His burden is light (Matt 11:30).

“Christ shall have dominion Over land and sea, Earth’s remotest regions Shall His empire be” (Psalm 72, Psalter #200).

October 6 – A Member Who Edifies Others
by Rev. Daniel Kleyn

Read: Romans 12:3-18, I Corinthians 12:12-27, Ephesians 4:16, Philippians 2:2-8

As members of a true church of Christ, we have the opportunity and privilege to use our God-given gifts for the welfare of the other members of Christ's body. We are able, "as mutual members of the same body," to serve "to the edification of the brethren, according to the talents God has given" us.

Every member of the church is unique. God makes it so, for God distributes among the members the different abilities and talents that the church needs.

Romans 12 indicates what some of those different gifts might be. Some have the gift of prophecy, some of ministry, some of teaching, some of exhorting, some of giving, some of ruling, some of showing mercy. And we can easily add to this list such things as the gift of prayer, the gift of music, the gift of patience, etc.

You may sometimes think you do not have any gifts. You might say: "Others have special talents, but not I. Others can contribute to the church and to the welfare of their fellow believers, but I have nothing to give or do. I'm rather unnecessary in the church."

But none of us may ever say that. The Scriptures plainly teach that Christ has given gifts to every single member of His church. If we think we do not have any, then perhaps we need to look harder to discover what Christ has given. Or perhaps we need to take more time to look at the needs that others have and think of concrete ways in which we can help them.

Having discovered our gifts, we may not be selfish with them. Those gifts are not given to us for our own advantage and advancement and praise. We must use our gifts for the benefit of others. Do the following with your gifts. Help those who are in need. Provide for those who are poor. Approach those who are lonely. Befriend those who have no friends. Comfort those who are sorrowful. Constantly look for ways to show love to your fellow saints.

But to use our gifts for the sake of others especially refers to our calling to seek their spiritual welfare. Why? Because we are mutual members of the same body, and must seek the edification of our fellow believers in everything we say and do. Let us speak with other church members about the Scripture and the preaching. Let us encourage our fellow believers to read the Bible and pray. Let us assist those who are struggling against temptation and sin. Let us speak of the love and faithfulness of God to those who are troubled and/or depressed.

One more thing we ought to do is to pray for our fellow believers. Every one of us is able to do this. Pray that God would bless, comfort, forgive, guide, protect, and save them. Be sure to pray for them every day. For when you do, then you will think about them. And if you think about them, then you will also remember to look for ways in which to use your unique gifts and talents for their physical and spiritual good.

May we take with us these beautiful words of Psalm 16: "I love Thy saints, who fear Thy Name And walk as in Thy sight; They are the excellent of earth, In them is my delight" (Psalm 16, Psalter #27).

October 7 – A Member Who Lives Antithetically
by Rev. Daniel Kleyn

Read: I Corinthians 5:9-11, II Corinthians 6:14-18, II Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15

Membership in a true church means being a covenant friend of God. God has established His covenant with us. God has included us, by His grace, in a covenant of friendship and fellowship. In that covenant, God and His people are friends. That is why membership in a true church involves also this calling: "It is the duty of all believers, according to the Word of God, to separate themselves from all those who do not belong to the church."

This is the antithesis. This is the antithetical life we must live. We must separate ourselves from the world of the ungodly, and from the false church.

The true church of Christ lives in a world in which wickedness abounds. Every day we are bombarded and allured by the sins of the ungodly – through advertising, music, television, the internet, and through our constant contact with the ungodly at school, at work, in stores, etc. Our calling is to say "No" to it all. Though we are sorely tempted by the lusts of the flesh, our response must be: "Let the world keep all that it offers – its language, music, riches, fornication, and pleasure. I don't want any of it. God calls me to live in spiritual separation from the ungodly."

This is necessary for the safety of believers and their children. Moses mentioned this just prior to Israel's entrance into Canaan. His words to the church were, "Israel then shall dwell in safety alone" (Deut 33:28).

Moses was not speaking of physical safety for Israel, but spiritual. By dwelling alone, the church and the people of God are kept from being destroyed spiritually. We are kept safe from being dragged into greater evils. We are kept safe from being swallowed up by a world that is bent on destroying the church. We are kept safe in the enjoyment of our salvation in Jesus Christ.

A faithful, antithetical life is necessary, not only for our own welfare, but also for the church of tomorrow. If we fail in this duty, the real danger could be for the future generations of the church. That happened to Lot. He chose to dwell in Sodom. He joined the world. And although he himself was saved, his family was lost. That is the sad result when God's people do not remain spiritually separate from the world – they go lost in their generations.

It is not easy to be in the world, but not of it. Our flesh longs for the treasures and pleasures of the world. We can also expect ridicule. But for the sake of the church's future, and for the sake of the honor of Christ's Name, may we be faithful.

And there is encouragement in this. For the antithetical calling is not a negative but a positive thing. It is something the child of God loves and wants and is thankful for. For while it is true that we will be alone from the ungodly, being alone from them means being alone with God. What more could we want? God is at our side. God is with us. God is our Friend.

"In sweet communion, Lord, with Thee I constantly abide; My hand Thou holdest in Thy own To keep me near Thy side"
(Psalm 73, Psalter #203).

**October 8 – Blessings of Church Membership
by Rev. Daniel Kleyn**

Read: Psalm 122, Ephesians 4:15-16

There are many (countless) blessings that follow from membership in a true church of Jesus Christ. Just think of all the blessings that have been mentioned (either explicitly or implicitly) in the previous meditations. Reflect on those blessings. Be thankful for them.

But consider also this blessing – that by means of church membership, we are able to worship God. The worship of our God is of central importance in our lives. It is also an important calling and duty. But we often find it difficult to devote time to this during the week, or to be consistent in doing so. However, in church on the Lord's Day, we are able to do it without being distracted by our earthly cares. What a blessing to be part of an instituted church and to be able to give God the praise and thanks that is due to His Name.

Another significant blessing of church membership is the fellowship of other believers. It is a great blessing to have fellow believers and to be part of the communion of saints. It is a blessing to be able to use our gifts for the welfare of others. It is also a blessing that our fellow saints use their gifts for our good. And it is a blessing to have fellow saints, because then you do not need to be alone in this world.

Just think of how difficult your Christian life would be without other believers. Just imagine if no one else loved God, read the Bible, prayed, or lived as a Christian. Just imagine if when you came to church on Sunday, the building was always empty, for there was no one else interested in worshipping God. You were the only one there, and you had to worship God alone.

This would mean that the only people you could have any fellowship with would be the ungodly. That would be difficult, and disastrous. It would be almost impossible to be a believer, and to live a Christian life.

What a blessing, therefore, to have others with whom we are one in Christ. We do not have to be alone in this world. God has given us all the saints we know and have regular fellowship with, and many others besides. It is a gift we should be thankful for, and that we should treasure.

But as great a blessing as this is, the most important blessing that comes from church membership is salvation. By means of faithful membership and diligent attendance, we hear the true preaching of the gospel. And that saves us, strengthens us in our faith, comforts our souls, and preserves us unto the end.

All this being true, why would any true believer not want to be a member of a true church of Christ? Why would any child of God want to separate himself from that church? Why would any saint want to live separate from Christ and His people? Only in a true church will the believer find Christ, and thus true happiness, comfort, safety, joy, and peace.

“Redeemed by Thee, I stand secure In peace and happiness; And in the Church, among Thy saints, Jehovah I will bless” (Psalm 26, Psalter #69).

Article 29: The Marks of the True Church, and Wherein She Differs from the False Church.

We believe that we ought diligently and circumspectly to discern from the Word of God which is the true church, since all sects which are in the world assume to themselves the name of the church. But we speak here not of hypocrites, who are mixed in the church with the good, yet are not of the church, though externally in it; but we say that the body and communion of the true church must be distinguished from all sects who call themselves the church. The marks by which the true church is known are these: if the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein; if she maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ; if church discipline is exercised in punishing of sin; in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the church. Hereby the true church may certainly be known, from which no man has a right to separate himself.

With respect to those who are members of the church, they may be known by the marks of Christians, namely, by faith; and when they have received Jesus Christ the only Savior, they avoid sin, follow after righteousness, love the true God and their neighbor, neither turn aside to the right or left, and crucify the flesh with the works thereof. But this is not to be understood as if there did not remain in them great infirmities; but they fight against them through the Spirit all the days of their life, continually taking their refuge in the blood, death, passion, and obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom they have remission of sins through faith in Him.

As for the false church, she ascribes more power and authority to herself and her ordinances than to the Word of God, and will not submit herself to the yoke of Christ. Neither does she administer the sacraments as appointed by Christ in His Word, but adds to and takes from them as she thinks proper; she relieth more upon men than upon Christ; and persecutes those who live holly according to the Word of God, and rebuke her for her errors, covetousness, and idolatry.

These two churches are easily known and distinguished from each other.

October 9 – Discerning the True Church
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

I Thessalonians 5:21: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.”

Art. 28 pressed upon every believer the solemn calling to find and join a true church. That naturally leads to the questions—What is a true church; where can such a true church be found; and how can such a true church be recognized? Art. 29 answers that question with the doctrine of the three marks of the true church.

If you open your Bible you will not find one verse or even one chapter in the Word of God where the three marks are delineated. Instead, to answer the questions above we will have to examine the whole Word of God, compare Scripture with Scripture, and examine certain biblical principles. But before we do that we should look at the subject more generally.

When you visit a new city and do some research, you will find that most places have a dazzling array of different churches on offer. This was true in the days of the *Belgic Confession* as well. “All sects which are in the world assume to themselves the name of the church.” “The true church must be distinguished from all sects who call themselves the church.” So true is this today that many Christians like to engage in “church shopping.” This is often the case if they are dissatisfied with some aspect of their church life—they just leave their church with very little consideration of the marks of the true or false church and find a new church which suits their fancy. But church membership is, as Art. 28 taught us, a long-term commitment. We may not leave a church lightly—and we certainly may never leave a true church to join a false church.

For many this whole discussion of true or false church is incomprehensible and even offensive. How dare we suggest that there could be false churches! What right do you have to question the veracity of the ministries of others! If a man (or a woman) says that his (or her) ministry is true, we must simply accept that. If a building has a sign “First Church of Anywhere,” we must simply recognize that that is a church. For such people the question is not over truth or falsehood, but the question is one of convenience or preference.

This is, however, a foolish and naïve attitude. Perhaps an illustration would help. If you visited a restaurant where the waiting staff was rude, the food was poorly prepared, and the conditions were unsanitary, would you return? Would you return every week for the next twenty years? Sadly, many Christians tolerate a poor church much more readily than they would a poor restaurant. They can discern a good restaurant, but they have no discernment whatsoever with respect to churches. Jesus and the apostles warn us about false doctrine. They warn us that, when false doctrine is tolerated, it spreads like leaven. They warn us that Christ will remove a church’s candlestick so that it no longer shines as a pillar of truth in the world. “I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan” (Rev 2:9). “So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth” (Rev 3:16).

It is therefore of the utmost importance that we can discern and know the true church from the false—for our spiritual welfare and our children’s, and for the glory of God.

October 10 – Distracted by the Wrong Marks
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Revelation 2:2: “... thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars.”

Yesterday we began to look at the concept of examining churches as to their truth or falsehood. While many object to this practice as unloving, harsh, and judgmental, the Bible makes clear that such an examination is necessary.

When we begin to examine the churches around us, we are tempted to look for the wrong marks. And if you ask professing Christians today why they are in a particular church or denomination, you will receive various answers. The problem with the vast majority of these answers is that they are subjective, and not objective, criteria. In other words, people who examine various options do so based on their feelings and emotions more than on what is true or false. Since we are emotional creatures by nature, it is difficult for us to avoid this. Therefore the Word of God gives us objective standards of truth and falsehood which we must look for.

Most people attend a church out of custom. I have heard people say, “I was born in this church. I will die in this church.” Such loyalty to one’s congregation is good—if the church is true! But if the church is false—and we will examine that possibility later—such an attitude is sinful stubbornness. Others attend a church for social reasons. If they examine their heart, the reason they attend the worship services is not to worship God or to hear the preaching, but so that they can see their friends and family. An interest in fellowship with the saints is good—if the people there are saints and the church is true. But the church is not a social club. When social activities become more important than the worship of the Almighty, we have sinned. Others attend a church out of loyalty to their family. Their family and friends attend there, and they enjoy a whole social network. Loyalty to family is good—if the church is true. But family must not become idols, and one must be less concerned with displeasing family than displeasing Christ (Luke 14:26). Still others attend church because it is convenient. The church is close by. No long drive is necessary to attend the services. But if that church is false, no amount of convenience can justify membership there. Christianity—true Christianity—is not always convenient! (Matt 16:24-25).

Besides this, many attend churches because of the programs they offer. If the church is lively—and even if the preaching is false—they will attend it. But the mark of a true church is not lively worship, but true, biblical, reverent worship! If the church offers activities for the children and the young people—but no pure preaching—they will attend it. Youth work is important—that is why Reformed churches have catechism—but it is not a mark of the true church either. Some prefer a “mission minded” church, or one which permits them to use and develop their “gifts.” Mission and gifts are important, but in themselves are not marks of the true church either. Others say that love must surely be the mark of the church. If the people are friendly, loving, generous, and kind, such church-shoppers will be tempted to join. Love, however, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Love is undoubtedly important, but who can discern how loving a church is? Many true churches have been slandered as “unloving” because of the impression of one visitor.

While many claim the name of church, we need *objective* standards. Thankfully the Word of God gives us such standards.

October 11 – The False Mixed with the True
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Romans 9:6: "... For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel."

When people first hear the terms "true church" and "false church", they might misunderstand, and when they misunderstand the natural reaction is anger or indignation. Therefore some clarification is necessary.

First, when we speak of the "true church," we do not mean that there is only one true church in the world. There is one church with respect to the universal body and bride of Christ, but there are many churches with respect to the institute. In Paul's day, for example, there was a true church in Corinth, another in Ephesus, and another in Antioch, and probably multiple true churches in those cities. Today there are true churches throughout the world. We would never be so arrogant as to assert that we are the only true church, or worse, that we are the only ones who are going to heaven!

Second, when we speak of the "true church," we do not mean that all the members of that church are Christians and therefore saved. The Bible makes clear that even in the purest churches under heaven there are hypocrites. The church in Jerusalem had an Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), and we can be sure that in true churches today there are hypocrites. Art. 29 speaks of these hypocrites "who are mixed in the church with the good, yet are not of the church, though externally in it." This is also true with respect to the children. Not all the children born and baptized in the church are elect children. "They which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed" (Rom 9:8). Nevertheless, because the church is the covenant community of God, it is not the calling of the church to flush out hypocrites—or to look upon everyone in the church with suspicion as a potential hypocrite—but to remain faithful to the Word of God. Christ will expose hypocrites in His own way and in His own time. The carnal seed has a way of expressing itself.

Third, when we speak of the "false church," we do not mean that all the members of that church are unbelievers. The church itself is false, but God may have some of His children there. Some may be believers who are untaught and ignorant; others are careless and foolish; and others are elect and not yet converted. This in no way, however, justifies their remaining in a false church or outside a true church. We must admonish such Christians to depart from the false church and join a congregation which bears the marks of the true church. We must pray for them that God gives them the strength to obey this.

Fourth, the true/false distinction must never be an occasion for spiritual pride. If, by the grace of God, the church of which we are members remains faithful, we must thank God for preserving His church in our midst. We must also heed the earnest warnings of Christ in Rev 2-3. Christ will take away the candlestick when a church is unfaithful. Where is the church in Ephesus today? She left her first love!

No church is immune from the threat of apostasy. Not even ours!

**October 12 – The Preaching of the Pure Doctrine of the Gospel
by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

I Timothy 3:15: “...which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”

The first and primary mark of the true church is the preaching of the pure doctrine of the Gospel. Without this mark a group may call itself a church, but it is *not* a church. Since this is the mark of the true church, this must be the priority for God’s people when they seek a church.

How infrequently this is done! Often a Christian decides to move. Perhaps he moves for better employment possibilities or to be closer to family, but before he moves he does not even consider the question of which church he will go to. He assumes that when he gets to his new location he will fit into one of the local churches. Then when he starts looking seriously for a church—something he should have done before he considered moving away—he does not ask the right questions. He judges churches on their friendliness, liveliness, and service rather than on the doctrine preached.

The true church is called “the pillar and ground of the truth” (I Tim 3:15). This means that the calling of the church in the world is to hold up and support the truth in the world. The true church must display the truth of God’s Word so that her own members know it and the world around her sees it. We live in a day when “truth is fallen in the street” (Isa 59:14), when “[God’s] people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hos 4:6). The churches today have little interest in truth. Instead, the churches want to “make the world a better place.” Now, there is nothing wrong with the world becoming a better place—although it is naïve to expect the church to be able to achieve much in that area—and there is nothing wrong with Christians seeking to help the poor, but the church institute does not have that role in the world. The church has a much more important function—and one only she can do. She must preach the truth.

Notice, too, how Art. 29 explains this first mark: “if the pure doctrine of the gospel is preached therein.” The issue is not that there is preaching—there must be preaching. Churches without preaching or churches which replace preaching with entertainment are not churches according to the Bible. The issue is not that there is lively preaching, interesting preaching, or a preacher with a pleasing delivery—by all means let the preaching be lively, interesting, and well-delivered. The issue is the *content* of the preaching. The issue is also not that the preaching is perfect—but it must be pure, that is, it must not be mixed with errors.

Therefore, when we look for a church we must ask this question—what does this church *teach*? Is there teaching—preaching from the pulpit and teaching of the children in catechism? Is the teaching pure—is it biblical? Does the minister explain the Scriptures so that we and our children “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (II Pet 3:18)? Nothing else matters in a church.

Are you in such a church? Be thankful, and support that church as a living member. Are you not in such a church? Seek that church without delay!

October 13 – The Second and Third Marks
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Matthew 28:20: “Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you ...”

The preaching of the pure gospel is the first mark of the true church. Without the preaching of the truth there can be lively worship, interesting and friendly people, great programs for young people and the elderly, and zeal for missions and helping the poor, but there is no church! The Mormons can boast all of the above, but the Mormons are a cult. False religions and even atheistic humanists can provide much of the above, but we would not classify them as churches.

We will treat the second and third marks together because we will develop these points more at length in later articles of the *Belgic Confession*. Art. 32 explains Christian discipline, and Art. 33-35 explain the two sacraments. These second and third marks depend on and flow out of the first. We simply cannot have the right administration of the sacraments without the pure gospel preached, and church discipline is impossible without preaching.

The two sacraments are baptism and the Lord’s Supper. A group of Christians without sacraments is not a church. The church *must* baptize and administer the Lord’s Supper. This is part of Christ’s Great Commission, His instructions to His church. “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Matt 28:18-20). Notice Christ’s instructions are not to engage in social work, not to entertain the youth, not to be politically active, but to preach or teach the commandments of Christ, and to baptize. Part of the “all things” which Christ commanded were the sacraments (Matt 26:26-29, 28:19) and Christian discipline (Matt 18:15-20).

The relationship between preaching (the first mark of a true church) and the sacraments and Christian discipline (the second and third marks of a true church) is important. As we shall see in Art. 33, the sacraments are signs and seals *of the promises declared in the gospel*. If the promises of the gospel are not preached, or if the promises of the gospel are corrupted in the preaching, how can the sacraments signify and seal those promises? Without the pure preaching of the gospel, the sacraments are meaningless! Moreover, the message proclaimed in the preaching and confirmed in the sacraments must be the same. Otherwise there is confusion. Christian discipline enforces the doctrine and life demanded by the Word of God. Without the preaching, discipline has no biblical basis—people will be placed under discipline not because their doctrine is false or their lifestyle is wicked, but because they do not please the church authorities. Moreover, without discipline the pure preaching of the gospel will not be maintained in a church for long. There needs to be accountability, both for the pastor and the members.

Art. 29 summarizes these three marks in these words: “... if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected, and Jesus Christ acknowledged as the only Head of the church.”

There is the church because *there* is Christ—and where Christ and His church are, *there* must we and our children be.

October 14 – Degrees of Truth and Error
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Revelation 3:2: “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain ...”

Art. 29 might give the impression that there is the true church—which is more or less perfect—and there is the false church—which is irredeemably evil—and nothing in between. The marks of the true church are “pure doctrine,” “pure administration of the sacraments,” and “church discipline”, which means that “all things are managed according to the pure Word of God.” Notice that word “pure.” It is also true that “these two churches are easily known and distinguished from each other,” that is, we can know which is the true church and which is the false church.

Nevertheless, a church does not become false overnight. The sad history of Christianity tells us that a church can be a true church—even the Roman Catholic Church was true at one point—but it can depart from the truth over time. Almost all apostate churches in existence today would have been considered true churches some one hundred or two hundred years ago.

To add to our confusion, there are many more churches today than there were in 1561, when our *Belgic Confession* was written. In 1561 there were in Europe four kinds of churches: Roman Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, and Anabaptist. Today there are dozens of Presbyterian denominations, Baptist denominations, and Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations, with Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and independent churches. The marks we are called to discern are the same three, but the number of possibilities is much larger. In addition, there are even within the same denomination pure and less pure churches.

All of this makes discerning the true and false church more difficult—but not impossible. Some today try to use the “pure” and “less pure” church distinction as an excuse, saying that no church is perfect. It is true that there is no such thing as a perfect church, but that does not justify someone remaining in an obviously false church. Remember the illustration of a restaurant. There is no perfect restaurant. Does that make all restaurants equally good or suitable places to eat? Does the non-existence of a perfect restaurant mean that we should eat where there is poor hygiene, where the waiting staff are rude, and where the food is laced with poison? Of course not! You would rightly warn your friends and family *against* such a place. If we have discernment about our physical food, why do so few have discernment about their spiritual food?

Our calling, then, is to discern. Are the marks present in this or that church? Are the marks somewhat obscured? In what direction is that church going spiritually—is it declining or is it growing in truth? If the church is beginning to decline, how serious is the declension, and is a reformation of that church possible? Even Luther and Calvin thought long and hard before they left the Roman Catholic Church. In the end, of course, they were put out of the church.

Let us seek for wisdom—and if by the grace of God, as I believe is the case, we have true churches, let us watch and pray, lest we depart from the way of truth.

October 15 – As for the False Church ...
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

John 9:22: "... for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue."

The false church is always a danger for Christians. The Christian has four main enemies—the flesh, the devil, the world, and the false church. The Bible is filled with warnings about false brethren (Gal 2:4), false gospels (Gal 1:8-9), false spirits and prophets (I John 4:1-2), false teachers (II Pet 2:1), and false apostles (II Cor 11:13). Despite these warnings, many find it offensive to speak about a false church. In our tolerant age we are supposed to accept all as true—it seems very arrogant to call someone's church a false church.

Nevertheless, the false church *does* exist. Luther once said that where God plants a church, the devil builds a chapel beside it—and we could add that the devil's chapel (the false church) is often bigger, livelier, and more popular than the true church of Christ. Art. 29 concludes, after identifying the marks of the true church, by warning against the false church. This is necessary because the false church never identifies itself as false. There is no "FalseChurch of Anywhere" in your town, I assure you! The devil "is transformed into an angel of light" (II Cor 11:14), and his churches convince many that they are true churches.

The marks of the false church are the opposite of the marks of the true church. First, the false church despises the Word of God. Where she will give the Word of God lip service, her real interest is in promoting her own power. "She ascribes more power and authority to herself and her ordinances than to the Word of God, and will not submit herself to the yoke of Christ." Thus the false church is more concerned with pragmatism than the Word of God—what works? What will make the congregation larger? What will make the church culturally acceptable? What will make the church rich and powerful? This is true of the mainstream apostate denominations as well as the megachurches. Therefore, obviously, you will not find true preaching in the false church. Second, the false church corrupts the sacraments. She does not see the sacraments as a sacred trust, but she "adds to and takes from them as she thinks proper." The medieval Roman church did this when she corrupted the two sacraments, baptism and Lord's Supper, and added five sacraments. But Rome is not the only false church which corrupts the sacraments. Third, the false church corrupts discipline. She "persecutes those who live holily according to the Word of God, and rebuke her for her errors, covetousness, and idolatry." Where Christian discipline is neglected, tyranny soon follows. Such a church promotes an environment in which sin and error flourish, and when someone speaks out against sin he will be persecuted. The Pharisees did this in Christ's day—they persecuted Christ Himself. Rome did this at the time of the *Belgic Confession*. And churches still do this today—when a member protests against the sins of the church, he is branded a troublemaker and is expelled from the membership of the church.

When a church has departed so far from the truth that it manifests the marks of the *false* church, it is time to flee. God's judgment will fall on such a church. The calling is clear: "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you" (II Cor 6:17).

Let us pray for, seek, join, and remain in the *true* church!

Article 30: The Government of and Offices in the Church.

We believe that this true church must be governed by that spiritual policy which our Lord hath taught us in His Word; namely, that there must be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; also elders and deacons, who, together with the pastors, form the council of the church: that by these means true religion may be preserved and the true doctrine everywhere propagated, likewise transgressors punished and restrained by spiritual means; also that the poor and distressed may be relieved and comforted, according to their necessities. By these means everything will be carried on in the church with good order and decency, when faithful men are chosen according to the rule prescribed by St. Paul in his epistle to Timothy.

**October 16 – The Church Must Be Governed
by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Ephesians 5:23 “...Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.”

Art. 30-32 deal with a specific aspect of the church, the subject of church polity: “We believe that this true church must be governed.” Church government is church polity. For many, church polity is a dry and boring subject, as dry and boring, they imagine, as politics are in the world. The writer of the *Belgic Confession* did not share such a view. He saw the necessity of good church government for the welfare of God’s people.

When church authority is neglected and denied or abused and usurped, the church suffers. For many years before the Reformation, the church had suffered tyranny. The pope declared himself to be the head of the church on earth. Under him were a number of different men in different positions, each with their own rank. The Roman Catholic church has the same governmental structure today. At the bottom are common church members without rights. They cannot appoint their own officebearers. They have no right to appeal the decisions of the church. In fact, strictly speaking, they are not the church. Only the clergy are the church. Indeed, only the pope is the church; and only they who are in communion with him can be called church. This is still Rome’s position. We call it hierarchy, an ever ascending succession of offices from parish priest, through bishop, archbishop and cardinal to the pope himself. The Reformation rejected such a tyrannical government over the church.

On the other hand, without any government, the church suffers chaos and confusion. How is God to be worshipped? Who makes the decisions in the local congregations? Who are the members and the leaders of the church? What is their relationship? How are truth and purity to be preserved in the congregations? The Anabaptists were radicals at the time of the Reformation, who, rejecting the tyranny of the pope and his clergy, sought to rid themselves of all or almost all church government. The church became a “free-for-all.” There are churches today where there is no membership list, no oversight of members, no supervision of the worship services, preaching, sacraments, and no discipline. Anything goes in the name of “Christian freedom.”

The Reformed churches reject both extremes. We teach freedom from the tyranny and abuse of hierarchy, but we also refuse to live in anarchy, a word which means “having no ruler.” Anarchy, both in church and state, is harmful.

We refuse anarchy because Christ is the Head of His church. As the Head, He is not only the source of the church’s life, but He also rules the church. Without the headship of Christ, the church would be chaotic and God would be dishonoured. A body which refuses to listen to the head is a monstrosity. A body which seeks to rule itself without a head is impossible. How thankful we must be that Christ has not left us headless. He is our loving and sovereign Head. Let us submit ourselves gladly to Him in all things, including submission to the church government which He has appointed.

October 17 – The Safety of Christ’s Yoke
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Matthew 11:29-30: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Government is everywhere. In the family, the husband and father is the head of the home. Wives are called to submit to their husbands. Husbands are called to rule their wives in love. Children are called to obey their parents. Citizens are subject to civil magistrates and government officials. Government is essential for the well being of any society.

The church must be governed also. Many Christians agree that the church universal is under the headship of Christ. All Christians are called to obey and serve Him. But many Christians do not agree that they must submit to the government *of a local congregation*. This is because they fail to recognize that Christ rules His people by His grace and Holy Spirit through His Word *in the church institute*. Art. 28 has already mentioned this: being a member of the church includes “submitting [ourselves] to the doctrine and discipline [of the church], bowing [our] necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ ...”

The government which Christ has ordained for His church is neither tyrannical nor negligent. Christ loves His church and therefore He has given to her a specific form of government for her edification. Paul writes. “For though I should boast somewhat more of our authority, which the Lord hath given us *for edification*, and not for your destruction, I should not be ashamed” (II Cor 10:8). Elsewhere Scripture states, “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (Heb 13:17). And again Paul beseeches, “to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake. And be at peace among yourselves” (I Thess 5:12-13). No wonder the Bible calls church leaders *shepherds*. They must love and care for the sheep as Christ Himself, who died for them, loves them and cares for them. Peter writes, “Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind. Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being examples to the flock” (I Pet 5:2-3). Paul warns the elders in Ephesus about this: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

The Christian needs to be in a church with good government because of the many false teachers who prey on Christians. Ordinarily, Christians not under the oversight of good elders will be easy prey for a convincing heretic. No wonder Jesus was so concerned for the people of Israel in His day: the spiritual leadership had degenerated so much that wolves instead of shepherds ruled over the flock. The flock was “as sheep having no shepherd” (Matt. 9:36).

Are you a member of a good Reformed church with a faithful pastor, wise elders and compassionate deacons? Be thankful for that blessing! If you are not, seek shelter under the wings of Christ’s church for the good of your own soul and that of your family!

October 18 – That Spiritual Polity
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

II Corinthians 10:4: “For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God ...”

Jesus Christ is King and Head of His church. Every Christian is called to submit to His yoke, and this includes submission to Him in the local congregation. Art. 27 already taught us about the kingship of Christ: “This church hath been from the beginning of the world, and will be to the end thereof; which is evident from this, that Christ is an eternal King, which without subjects He cannot be.” The subjects or citizens of King Jesus are the members of the church. Christ also rules over the wicked, but He rules over them in a different sense. We speak of Christ’s “rule of power” over the whole universe, and His “rule of grace” over His people, the church. That distinction is very important in our consideration of church government.

Christ rules over the wicked with a rod of iron; He dashes them in pieces like a potter’s vessel; and He exerts His almighty power for the deliverance and safety of His church (Psa 2:9; Eph 1:22; Rev 19:15). It is not, therefore, the role of the church to Christianize the world, to bring all aspects of human society under Christian principles or to bring heaven to earth. The kingdom of Christ, manifested in the church, is not carnal, that is, “fleshly,” or governed by fleshly, worldly principles such as brute force, political intrigue or numerical strength (John 18:36-37). Jesus warned His disciples: “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve” (Luke 22:25-26). When men through selfish ambition seek to govern the church for their own personal advancement, they do damage to the church and dishonour the church’s Lord.

For this reason, Art. 30 reminds us that “this true church must be governed by *that spiritual polity* which our Lord hath taught us in His Word.” Notice that word *spiritual*. The three words we should remember when we speak of church polity are “Word,” “Spirit” and “grace.”

First, the power by which Christ rules in His church is the power of grace. Grace is that beautiful attitude of favour which God displays to unworthy and undeserving sinners. But grace is also a power. By the power of grace, God subdues our sins and renews us according to the image of Jesus Christ. Grace is a greater power than any power the world possesses: grace makes of a sinner a saint; of a blasphemer a singer of God’s praises; of a mean-spirited, spiteful, selfish, hateful person a lover of God and his neighbour. Second, the standard by which Christ rules His church is the Word of God, the Bible. This means that the church is not governed by the opinions of the powerful or more influential members of the church; by the whims of the young people; by the dictates of society; but that the whole church submits together to the Word of God in all things. Quite simply, there is one voice to be heeded and obeyed in the church: Christ’s as He speaks in Holy Scripture! Third, this power can be summarised in one word: spiritual. The church does not rely on carnal means to bring people into the church or to keep them in the church. The Spirit, by His grace and Word, is active in the church for the glory of God.

Is that how the church of which you are a member, is governed? Then you may know yourself to be under the care of the Good Shepherd.

**October 19 – Ruled by Officebearers
by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Titus 1:5: “...that thou shouldst set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city ...”

Paul left Titus on the island of Crete to deal with unfinished, ecclesiastical business: he must ordain elders in every city. For the apostle Paul, a church is not organized, and therefore something is wanting (or lacking) if officebearers, especially elders, have not been ordained to rule the local congregations. This is very enlightening for our modern age. It is not enough for a group of Christians to meet together in someone’s house to have informal Bible studies or even to listen to sermons on the internet. Christian fellowship is good, but that *in itself* is not a church. A church institute does not exist without elders. A group of Christians might have a missionary working among them, but without their own elders they cannot call themselves a church. They are a fellowship and they should seek to be organized as a church. Until they do, there is something wanting there.

Art. 30 makes the same point about the “spiritual polity” by which the true church must be governed: “namely, that there must be ministers ... also elders and deacons, who, together with the pastors, form the council of the church ...” These men—ministers, elders and deacons—are officebearers. They are necessary for a church to exist in any given place.

An officebearer is one who occupies an office. By “office” we mean a position of authority. Specifically, an officebearer in the church is a man who is called by Christ through the church to occupy a position of authority in the church. As an officebearer that man represents Jesus Christ, who, as the Prophet, Priest and King, is *the* Officebearer from whom all other officebearers derive their authority. In the Old Testament, God called and equipped men to serve Him in the offices of prophet, priest and king. In the New Testament, every Christian occupies the office of believer and is a prophet, priest and king by the Spirit and grace of Christ. Besides the office of believer, there are the special offices of minister, elder and deacon. These offices correspond roughly to the offices of prophet (minister), priest (deacon) and king (elder).

There are some who insist that the office of believer in the New Testament does away with the need for special offices in the New Testament church. Their cry is “every man ministry.” But we must recognize that Jesus Himself has ordained how He will govern His church. “Every man ministry” is not the rule of Scripture but the cry of a rebellious spirit. It requires meekness and humility to submit to the church government which Christ has instituted.

An officebearer is not a mere functionary. He has real, spiritual authority. I Thessalonians 5:12 says that officebearers are “over you” in the Lord. That authority comes from Jesus Christ Himself. Christ preaches to us through the ministers; Christ governs us through the elders; Christ administers mercy to us through the deacons. We must, therefore, recognize Christ’s authority in the godly officebearers whom He has sent. This means “that I ... submit myself to their good instruction and correction with due obedience; and also patiently bear with their weaknesses and infirmities, since it pleases God to govern us by their hand” (LD 39, Q&A 104, H.C.). This also means that officebearers must give account to Christ for the way in which they have exercised their office. An awesome, but a blessed, responsibility indeed! (Heb 13:17; I Pet 5:4).

Do you love your officebearers, pray for them, and submit to them for Christ’s sake?

**October 20 – Temporary, Extraordinary Officebearers
by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

Ephesians 4:11: “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;”

The subject of church office is very important. The question is often asked, “Which offices must the church have?” Some, such as the Roman Catholic church, have many offices foreign to Scripture, such as the pope, cardinal, archbishop, archdeacons and many others. Others, such as some modern mega churches, have multiplied positions in the churches: they have senior pastors, associate pastors, executive pastors, youth pastors, worship leaders, youth coordinators, and much more, but neglect the biblical offices. Others, such as the Charismatics, claim that the office of prophet, evangelist and apostle remain in the church. The Reformed position is that Christ has appointed three permanent offices: minister, elder and deacon. These three offices are sufficient for the good governance of the church.

Ephesians 4:11 lists several offices, some of which were temporary, extraordinary offices. The most significant of these is apostle. Even at the time of the writing of the New Testament, the office of apostle was limited to the eleven disciples, Matthias and Paul (Acts 1:22, 9:15, 26:15-18). “Are all apostles?” asks Paul rhetorically in I Corinthians 12:29. The Bible is clear that the office of apostle passed away with the completion of the Bible by John when he received the Revelation. We see this, first, because the apostles were a foundational office, that is, the apostles were called to build the foundation of the New Testament church. Once that foundation was built—upon the writings of the apostles and prophets—the need for foundation-builders passed away (Eph 2:20). Second, we know that no man occupies the office of apostle today because of the unique qualifications of an apostle. An apostle had to be an eyewitness of the risen Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 1:22; I Cor 9:1-2). An apostle had to be able to prove his apostolic credentials by miracles (II Cor 12:12; Rom 15:19; Heb 2:3-4). No man today—despite the claims of modern Charismatics—can prove such credentials. Third, an apostle, by virtue of his office, had unique authority. This included infallible teaching authority, authority of government over all the churches and authority of discipline (I Cor 7:17, 14:37; II Cor 10:8, 11:28). No man today can claim such authority over all the churches. Thus we must reject all modern claimants to the apostolic office (Rev 2:2).

Besides apostles, there were evangelists and prophets in the New Testament church. An evangelist is not merely a church planter as we might understand that word today. An evangelist—such as Timothy, Titus and Philip—was an apostolic assistant. The work of an evangelist today is included in the role of a minister (II Tim 4:5). A prophet was a person who, before the completion of Scripture, received and communicated direct messages from God. Agabus was such a prophet (Acts 11:28, 21:10). With the completion of Scripture, direct communication with God in the form of special revelation has ceased. This was another foundational office which is no longer necessary in the modern church (Eph 2:20; Heb 1:1-3).

The extraordinary offices have fulfilled their purpose. Now we have the fullness of the Spirit and the completed Scriptures (II Tim 3:16).

But the permanent, special offices of minister, elder and deacon remain.

October 21 – Male Officebearers Only
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

I Timothy 2:12: “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.”

Male headship is a doctrine of the Word of God which brings the church into conflict with the world. Faced with modern feminism, many churches are tempted to open the offices of minister, elder and deacon to women. The Reformed churches, in faithfulness to Christ, must resist. The passages which address the subject of officebearers in the New Testament church all teach that men, and not women, must be in those offices. The first deacons were men: “Look ye out among you seven men ...” (Acts 6:3). In the pastoral epistles to Timothy and Titus, Paul restricts the offices to men. The *Belgic Confession* speaks about “faithful men [being] chosen according to the rule prescribed by St. Paul in his epistle to Timothy.” In I Timothy 3:1-13, Paul gives the qualifications for elders and deacons, one of which is that he be “the husband (if he is married) of one wife” (v2, 12). Clearly, only men are included in this description. The same instructions are given in Titus 1:5-9. However, I Timothy 2 is even clearer. There Paul states expressly, “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence” (v11-12).

We must notice, of course, that Jesus was not anti-women. Christ had many female followers, who were devoted to Him and served Him (Luke 8:2-3). Women were even privileged to be the first to see Him alive after His resurrection (Matt. 28:5-10). Women were present in the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:14). Women have been and still are members in the church and of great service to the church (Acts 5:14, 8:12, 9:36, 17:12, 21:9; Rom. 16:1-2; Gal. 3:28; Phil. 4:3). But for all that, Jesus appointed *only men* to be officebearers in His church. Women must not feel slighted by this, because godly women will humbly submit to Christ’s will as it is revealed in Scripture; and, besides this, the offices of the church are not positions of prestige, but places of lowly service. Male officebearers, called to be pastors, elders and deacons, must remember this. They are not called for their self-aggrandizement, but to serve the saints.

Feminists, however, object that the rule prescribed by Paul is only Paul’s opinion, and that Paul was influenced by his rabbinical teaching as a Jew. This is an attack on the inspiration of the Bible. Paul is an apostle of Jesus Christ who speaks with the authority of the one who sent him. Before he introduces specific teaching on the position of men and women in the church, he underlines the authority he has as an apostle: “Whereunto I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle (I speak the truth in Christ, and lie not;) a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity” (I Tim 2:7). Also in I Corinthians 14—after he teaches that women are to be silent in the churches—Paul writes, “if any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord” (v37).

A humble Christian woman will listen to the Word of God, even when her flesh is offended by it. Christ ordained male officebearers for the church’s good, including the good of the women of the church.

October 21 – Pastors to Preach the Word
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Romans 10:14: “... And how shall they hear without a preacher?”

The first of the three offices which Christ has given to His church is the minister or pastor. Many believe—and, sadly, some ministers do nothing to dispel this myth—that the minister is the “boss” of the congregation. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although the minister has real authority in the church, he is a servant of the congregation. The word minister means to serve. Woe to that minister who uses the ministry as the Pharisees did: “[they] love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi” (Matt 23:6-7)! Instead, a minister knows that he gives himself to the labours of the ministry so that he might serve the Lord Jesus by edifying the church. The other title of the minister is pastor. This word means shepherd. The minister or pastor must remember the words of the Lord Jesus to Peter: “Feed my lambs ... Feed my sheep” (John 21:15-16). Woe unto the shepherd who feeds himself and neglects the sheep (Ezek 34:2)!

The minister or pastor is a servant of Jesus Christ and a shepherd of the sheep with real, spiritual authority. He rules with the elders in the consistory of the church. The main work of a pastor, however, is to preach. The apostles summarised the minister’s calling: “we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). The minister is not a social worker, but a preacher. Therefore the bulk of his time and effort must be devoted to the preparing of sermons, as well as the other teaching he gives throughout the week. This includes catechism classes for the youth, Bible studies, public lectures and writing projects. For this reason, a congregation must not be surprised—or offended—if their pastor spends a lot of time in his study. That is where he prepares the sermons and other materials with which he is called to feed the flock. Without that time in the study, he has very little to say when he is in the pulpit.

The main purposes of pastors, as outlined in Art. 30, are first, “that by these means the true religion may be preserved” and, second, that “the true doctrine [be] everywhere propagated.” Preaching, which, as Art. 29 already explained, is the first mark of a true church, is necessary for the wellbeing—even the being—of the church. And preaching is not the task of just anybody. A man must be called through the church by Jesus Christ Himself to preach. Paul asks the question, “And how shall they preach, except they be sent?” (Rom 10:15). Only then is the word which the church hears, the authoritative, official, word of Jesus Christ. Anyone can speak *about* Christ, but only through a preacher does Christ Himself speak.

Without the preaching, the church cannot continue. She lacks the main means by which she worships God. She lacks the chief means of grace. She lacks faithful instruction from the Word of God. This is one of the main reasons why the modern churches are so weak. It makes one want to weep to see the confusion and ignorance of many Christians. Why? Because ministers are doing everything except preaching (Isa 56:10)!

How thankful we must be for faithful preachers! How we must pray for our preachers! How we must pray that the Lord would raise up—even of our own sons—more faithful preachers so that the Gospel can be preached to us, to our children and to the ends of the earth!

October 23 – Preaching: the Voice of Jesus Christ
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

John 10:27: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me:”

There is much confusion about preaching. For some, preaching is that intolerably boring and seemingly endless, part of the service where the minister drones from the pulpit. For others, preaching is the minister sharing a thought from the Bible. For others, preaching is a short, entertaining message or story on how to live a better life. If we do not know what preaching is, how will we ever learn our need for it and appreciate what a gift Christ has given to us?

First, the Greek verb “to preach” in the New Testament is “to herald.” A herald is an official, commissioned messenger of the king. This means, first, that a preacher brings no message of his own. The calling of a preacher—and woe to the preacher who does not do this—is to communicate what the king announces to the people. He may not add something to the message to make it palatable to the hearers; he may not take something away from the message to make it more “relevant.” It is the word of the king! And the king of whom we speak is the Lord Jesus Christ. Since this is the case, the minister must preach the Word of God. This does not mean that the minister merely mentions a Bible passage occasionally in his sermon or even uses a text as a “peg” on which to hang his message. This means that the sermon must be an explanation, an exposition of the Bible itself.

Second, as a herald, the preacher must be sent by King Jesus Himself. No man (and certainly no woman) has the right to send himself, to make himself a minister or a preacher. A man might be able to stand before the people and give a good explanation of the Bible, but that in itself is not preaching if that man was not sent by Jesus Christ. Only a herald has the right to speak authoritatively for the king. Only a preacher has the right to preach authoritatively for Jesus Christ. “And how shall they preach, except they be sent?” (Rom 10:15).

Third, since a preacher is an authoritative herald of Jesus Christ, Christ Himself is pleased to speak through him. Thus, when you hear faithful preaching, you do not merely hear the voice of a man. As wonderful as it might seem, you hear the voice of Christ Himself. That is why the Reformed have said, “The preaching of the Word of God *is* the Word of God,” or “The preaching of the Gospel is the *voice* of Christ.” Believers hear the voice of Christ—as He Himself promised (John 10:27)—not as voices in their heads but in the preaching. Paul makes this very clear in two passages. “How shall they believe in him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?” (Rom 10:14, my translation). The better translation is not “*of whom* they have not heard” but “*whom* they have not heard.” In preaching, we do not merely hear of or about Christ; we hear Christ Himself. “But ye have not so learned Christ; If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus” (Eph 4:20-21). The Ephesians, who had never seen Jesus in the flesh, heard Him (not merely about Him) in the preaching of the Gospel.

That gives preaching its authority. When preaching is faithful to the Word of God, Christ Himself speaks to the church. Christ commands; Christ rebukes; Christ instructs; Christ edifies; Christ comforts. Shall we neglect to hear—or even despise—the voice of Christ? We do when we neglect, despise and refuse to hear the preaching of the Gospel in a true church.

October 24 – The Office of Elder or Bishop
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Philippians 1:1: “ ... to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:”

The New Testament speaks of three offices in the church: minister, elder and deacon. There are two words for elder in the New Testament. The first is *presbuteros*. From this word the term Presbyterian is derived. The second is *episcopos*. From this word the term Episcopalian is derived. Our Bibles usually translate *presbuteros* as elder and *episcopos* as bishop. But we must not imagine that the modern use of terms such as Presbyterianism or Episcopalianism accurately reflects the meaning of *presbuteros* and *episcopos* in the New Testament.

The term elder is already found in the Old Testament. There the older, and therefore supposedly wiser, men of Israel exercised a leadership role among the people (Exo 18:21-22). There were also judges among the people (II Chron 19:6-7). In the days of Christ, Israel had elders who joined with the chief priests to condemn Jesus (Matt 27:1). This office passed over into the church of Jesus Christ. The term elder (*presbuteros*) means, at its most basic, an older man. Older men were generally chosen as elders because an elder required the gravity, soberness and wisdom which come from experience and are often absent in younger men. The office of elder is further described by the second word, *episcopos*, often translated as bishop in the New Testament. The word means one who looks over or oversees.

Episcopalianism errs when it treats elder and bishop (overseer) as distinct offices. Episcopalianism (with Roman Catholicism) errs even more grievously when it treats the office of bishop as *higher in rank* than the office of elder. Although the Bible uses two words, they are used interchangeably of the one office. In Titus 1:5, Paul commands Titus to “ordain elders (*presbuteros*) in every city,” and then immediately adds, “for a bishop (*episcopos*) must be ...” (v7). In Acts 20 Paul calls the elders (*presbuteros*) of the church of Ephesus (v17) but he reminds them, “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers” (*episcopos*) (v28). Peter makes the same point in I Peter 5 where he writes, “the elders (*presbuteros*) which are among you I exhort” (v1). Then he adds, “feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight (*episcopos*) thereof” (v2).

We can see what the work of an elder is from the name *episcopos*. An elder is (usually) an older, wiser, more experienced man who oversees the church. This means that elders have real, spiritual authority over the whole church and over every member. They are the official representatives of Jesus Christ, through whom He is pleased to rule. Art. 30 names some of the responsibilities of elders. They must see to it that the Word of God is faithfully preached; that “true religion [is] preserved and the true doctrine everywhere propagated,” that “transgressors [in the congregation are] punished and restrained by spiritual means”; that “the poor and distressed may be relieved and comforted”; and that “everything will be carried on in the church with good order and decency”.

This means that the elders in the church oversee the entire work of the church—the preaching, worship, sacraments, catechism classes, diaconate work, discipline and even the property of the congregation. They do so for the welfare of the church.

Respect those men, pray for them, and submit to them for Christ’s sake.

October 25 – The Plurality of Elders
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Acts 14:23: “And when they had ordained them elders in every church ...”

Elders are so important for the church that without elders, there is no church. A group of Christians without elders—even if they have a missionary working among them to preach the Gospel—is not a church in the proper, official sense. Such a group of Christians may enjoy fellowship, but they cannot call themselves a church. They should seek to become organized as a local, instituted congregation of Jesus Christ with “bishops [elders] and deacons” (Phil 1:1). Until they are organized, something is wanting—missing or lacking—there (Tit 1:5).

Another important principle of Reformed church polity is the plurality of elders. A group of Christians must have, besides the minister, a minimum of two elders and one deacon to be an instituted church. Ideally, the church should have more. Assemblies of these officebearers have specific names. In the days of Christ, Israel’s religious affairs were governed by the Jewish council or Sanhedrin. Today, Presbyterians speak of a session—a “sitting” of elders—and Reformed churches speak of a consistory. The consistory consists of the elders, usually with the minister who is also an elder (I Tim 5:17). The minister, elders and deacons are together called the council. Thus Art. 30 teaches: “[there must be] elders and deacons, who, together with the pastors, form the council of the church.”

Why a plurality of elders? First, this is the practice of the apostolic church as recorded in the New Testament. On Paul’s first missionary journey, many believed in Christ in various cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe. On the way back through these cities, we read that “they had ordained them elders in every church” (Acts 14:23). Paul and Barnabas do not ordain one elder in every church. Nor does Paul ordain a bishop to rule over several churches in one area. Elders (plural) are ordained in every church (singular). Thus we have example. We also have precept. Paul commands Titus to ordain a plurality of elders on the island of Crete. “For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee” (Tit 1:5). Paul writes “elders (plural) in every city (singular).” In fact, in every place in the New Testament where elders are mentioned in a local church setting, there is a plurality of elders—more than one elder per congregation (Acts 20:17; I Tim 5:17; Jam 5:14; I Pet 5:1). Paul only speaks of “elder” (singular) when he is outlining the various qualifications for an individual elder (I Tim 3:1-7) or where he is dealing with the discipline of an individual elder (I Tim 5:19).

There is great wisdom in the practice of the plurality of elders. One man—even well intentioned—can be corrupted by power. Other men are a check on folly and sinful ambition. The Reformed have always feared placing too much power into the hands of one man. The irony is, that when a church refuses to have biblical officebearers, often one man with great gifts and abilities will naturally rise to the top and become a tyrant. Better by far to adopt the government which Christ has ordained: “Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Prov 11:14).

October 26 – Transgressors Punished and Restrained by Spiritual Means
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Matthew 18:18: “...Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

We have seen that the elders and ministers together make up the consistory which rules the local congregation. Paul speaks of two kinds of elders in I Timothy 5:17: “Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.” All the elders rule, and all the elders must have some capacity for teaching—in the absence of ministers they may be called to teach catechism classes; they are required to teach the people by word and example, privately and from house to house (I Tim 3:2; Tit1:9). Among the elders, some are called to preach and teach fulltime. These men are the pastors or ministers and for that work they are supported by the congregations (I Tim 5:18).

One important work that the consistory performs is discipline. This is the subject of Art. 32 but we should mention it here because Art. 30 makes a very important point about that work which falls under the remit of the eldership. “Transgressors [may be] punished and restrained by spiritual means.”

For some modern Christians, such language is disturbing. Do the elders of the church really have the authority to *punish and restrain* transgressors? Punishment and restraint sound very medieval. Perhaps we have visions of the rack, thumbscrews and other horrific torture devices! But the *Belgic Confession* is very careful in the wording: “by spiritual means.” This is important to remember because Christ has given authority in various spheres. In the home, Christ has ordained that the husband be the head. In the state, Christ has ordained civil government and given to it the power of the sword (Rom 13:3-4). Therefore the civil government can use various physical means to restrain and punish criminals: fines, imprisonment and even the death penalty. But Christ has not given the power of the sword to the church. In the Old Testament, in the nation of Israel, there was a blurring of roles. In Israel, the elders could inflict physical punishment, even death by stoning (Deut 21:18-21). In the New Testament, the church has *only* spiritual means for punishing and restraining members who walk in sin. But those means must not be despised.

The church has spiritual means which are mighty in the hand of Christ. Through the spiritual means—which Christ calls “the keys of the kingdom” (Matt 16:18-19, 18:18)—Christ opens the kingdom to some and shuts it against others. To be admitted into the kingdom of heaven is a far greater blessing than to receive a passport, visa or citizenship in any earthly nation. To be excluded from the kingdom of heaven is far worse than banishment, imprisonment or even death. This does not mean—as we shall see in Art. 32—that the church has the right to throw out of the kingdom whomever the elders deem unworthy. When the spiritual means are used *correctly*, *Christ Himself* admits some into and excludes some from the kingdom: “Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth *shall be bound in heaven*: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth *shall be loosed in heaven*” (Matt 18:18).

The preaching of the Gospel and Christian discipline used as the keys of the kingdom of heaven, are real, awesome, spiritual powers!

No kingdom on earth has power as great as that!

October 27 – Everything With Good Order And Decency
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

I Corinthians 14:40: “Let all things be done decently and in order.”

In Corinth, chaos, confusion and disorder were seriously threatening the welfare of the church. A survey of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians reveals disunity and schism (1:10-11), immaturity and carnality (3:1-3), gross sins tolerated in the congregation and not addressed by the elders (5:1-2), civil lawsuits among the members (6:1-2), confusion over the subject of marriage and divorce (7:1-39), confusion over meats offered to idols and idolatry itself (8:1-13; 10:19-33), gluttony and drunkenness at the Lord’s table (11:20-22), confusion and misuse of spiritual gifts without the exercise of love, chaos in the worship services (12:1-14:40) and false views on the doctrine of the resurrection (15:1-58).

This survey might be surprising to some because many have an almost romantic idealism about the early church as it is described in Acts and the epistles. “If only we could go back to the way it was before so many man-made doctrines and practices were adopted” is the cry of many modern Christians. But take off those rose-tinted spectacles! Churches like Corinth and the churches in Galatia were seriously threatened by false doctrine and evil practices. Much of what Paul wrote to these churches—and we have not even considered the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3—is rebuke! For example, Paul writes concerning the Corinthians’ celebration of the Lord’s Supper, “When ye come together therefore into one place, this is not to eat the Lord’s Supper ... What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I praise you not” (I Cor 11:20,22). Having described what the Corinthians did, Paul explained what the Corinthians ought to do. Later in the epistle, Paul described their worship. But this is not to give us an example of how we should worship God. Quite the opposite—he wrote this to show the Corinthians that they should *not* worship God that way because it is disorderly! “How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation. Let all things be done unto edifying ... For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints ... Let all things be done decently and in order” (I Cor 14:26,33,40).

Decency and order do not restrict the Spirit. The Spirit as God is not the author of confusion, but the Spirit of order and decency. Therefore a “spiritual” church is an orderly church. A disordered, chaotic church, where everyone does what seems good to them, is not a spiritual church. The Spirit is grieved there.

Decency and order are watchwords in the Reformed churches. Christ has given officebearers to the churches so that the business of the church is conducted decently and in order. This decency and order apply to the lives of the members, the instruction given in catechism and from the pulpit, the worship services, including the administration of the sacraments, and the meetings of the officebearers in consistory and council. Does that sound stuffy and restrictive? On the contrary, it is good for the church. Be thankful for decency and order in the church and seek to promote it by your good behaviour and submission to God-appointed officebearers for Christ’s sake and God’s glory.

October 28 – The Office of Deacon
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Acts 6:2-3: “ ... it is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables: Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. ”

Christ, who loves His church, has not only given Himself for her salvation, but He has given her gifts at His ascension. These gifts are many, but one important gift is officebearers, in particular “pastors and teachers” (Eph 4:8, 11). These officebearers are necessary for the good government and welfare of the church. We have examined ministers and elders. The third permanent, special office in the church of Jesus Christ is the deacon. Collectively, deacons are called the diaconate. The word deacon comes from the Greek word *diakonos*. The non technical meaning of *diakonos* is servant. It is important to understand that because not all references in the New Testament are to the office of deacon proper. Sometimes *diakonos* means only servant, and in those cases, even women are called deaconesses. Therefore, not all servants are deacons, but all deacons are servants.

The deacons, like the ministers and elders, hold an office, a position of authority. This is clear from I Timothy 3 where the qualifications of elders are set forth. Immediately after giving the qualifications for one office, the elder, Paul writes, “Likewise must the deacons be ...” (v8). The deacons are also included with elders in Paul’s greeting to the Philippians (Phil 1:1). We must not think that the deacons are men who merely deal with some financial matters in the congregation by collecting and counting the offerings. Their work is official, important, ecclesiastical, spiritual work.

Many churches do not have deacons. Others call men deacons but these men do not do the work of deacons. There is probably more confusion over this office than the other two offices. Does a deacon just look after the money? Is he just a charitable worker? What does the deacon do? How are the congregations supposed to relate to the deacons? The work of the deacons is outlined in Art. 30 briefly thus: “there must be ... deacons ... that the poor and distressed may be relieved and comforted, according to their necessities.” Reformed churches have often summed up that work in one phrase, “the ministry of mercy.”

First, deacons are called to collect the alms. The word alms means mercy. Many churches have a benevolent fund for monies particularly designated for the relief of the poor. Almsgiving is a Christian duty, calling and privilege. Collecting the alms is a serious responsibility. Deacons must be honest men without covetousness. Second, deacons are called to distribute the alms. Deacons must be wise in this distribution, so that the truly needy are not neglected and the greedy, lazy and irresponsible are not encouraged in sinful behaviour. The deacons, therefore, do not simply give away “free money” without careful and prayerful thought, and this work, too, is supervised by the elders of the congregation.

Our calling toward the deacons is, first, to give generously. This makes diaconate work easier. Second, we must alert the deacons to needs in the congregation. The deacons are given by Christ to help the poor and distressed. But they need to be told about poverty and distress! Third, there must be a willingness to seek help from the deacons. Let not shame keep us from Christ’s ministers of mercy!

October 29 – The Poor Relieved and Comforted
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Ephesians 4:28: "... Let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth."

Poverty is a reality in this fallen world. The unbelieving world imagines that with enough social programs they will be able to eradicate poverty. Jesus Christ said that there would always be poverty (John 12:8). God has always commanded that His people show concern for the poor. However, what many Christians have not noticed is that the primary concern for the poor must be for the poor *among the people of God*. In Israel, God commanded that the poor brethren (fellow Israelites within the covenant community) be cared for by the generosity of fellow Israelites. There were various provisions in the Law. For example, the poor could glean the fields of the rich; the poor could be "redeemed" and the sacrificial offerings were less demanding for the impoverished (Lev 19:10, 25:25; Deut 15:7-11; Lev 5:7). When the prophets preached against the exploitation of the poor by the rich, they had primarily the poor within Israel in mind (Amos 5:11-12, 8:4-6). In the New Testament, the apostle Paul did not seek to help all the poor of the Roman empire. He did help his neighbour when opportunity arose. Paul's primary concern, however, (apart from the preaching of the Gospel, of course) was the poor in the church. To that end, Paul organized collections for the impoverished saints in Jerusalem (Acts 24:17; Rom 15:26; II Cor 8-9; Gal 2:10). Both James and John made the same application to the poor in the congregations (Jam 1:27, 2:14-16; I John 3:17-18). This does not mean that the church refuses to help the poor who are not members of the congregation, but it does mean that the primary focus of the work of the deacons is the poor of Christ.

The poor in the church of Jesus Christ must not be despised or neglected. They must not be viewed as a burden or a nuisance. It must be seen as a great privilege for us to help the poor, for in so doing we serve Jesus Christ Himself (Matt 25:34-40). But at the same time, we must not be naïve. It is not the Christian's calling to give money to everyone who claims to be poor. This is where the deacons need much wisdom. Paul gives some principles to Timothy in his first epistle. First, the primary responsibility for the poor within the congregation is with their own family. Paul has sharp words for Christians who neglect their impoverished relatives. The church should not be charged with their financial support (5:3, 8, 16). Second, Paul insists that people work, and those who refuse to work may not eat. Idleness and dependency by the poor are to be discouraged (Eph 4:28; II Thess 3:10-12). Indeed, it is good for the deacons to encourage budgeting, thrift and stewardship, for often poverty is caused by mismanagement of funds. Third, those who are poor indeed must be helped, not only financially and generously, but with comfortable words of Scripture.

The deacons are not mere social workers. They are not like the clerks in the social welfare office of the secular state. They are the official representatives of the merciful Christ who comes to relieve the poor in the churches. Their work is as spiritual as that of the ministers and elders.

Let them be received as such.

Article 31: The Ministers, Elders, and Deacons.

We believe that the ministers of God's Word, and the elders and deacons, ought to be chosen to their respective offices by a lawful election by the church, with calling upon the name of the Lord, and in that order which the Word of God teacheth. Therefore every one must take heed not to intrude himself by indecent means, but is bound to wait till it shall please God to call him, that he may have testimony of his calling and be certain and assured that it is of the Lord.

As for the ministers of God's Word, they have equally the same power and authority wheresoever they are, as they are all ministers of Christ, the only universal Bishop, and the only Head of the Church. Moreover, that this holy ordinance of God may not be violated or slighted, we say that every one ought to esteem the ministers of God's Word and the elders of the Church very highly for their work's sake, and be at peace with them without murmuring, strife or contention, as much as possible.

October 30 – Lawful Election by the Church
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Acts 6:3: “Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report ...”

It is a fundamental principle of Reformed church polity that the local church chooses her own officebearers—her own minister, elders and deacons. Reformed churches differ sharply from hierarchical forms of church government. For example, in the Roman Catholic church the priests are appointed by the bishop. He determines—without any input from the local congregation—who shall be the priest. Therefore, the priest is imposed upon the congregation by a higher ecclesiastical authority. This is the case for all the offices in the Roman Catholic church. The cardinals are appointed by the pope; the archbishop, bishops and other offices—which are unbiblical offices—are in no way determined by the people. This kind of imposition from the outside is practiced by other types of churches as well, for example by Episcopalianism and Methodism.

Art. 31 condemns such an approach. First, no higher ecclesiastical authority—or even the civil authority of the state—has the right to determine the officebearers of the local congregation. This includes the pope, bishop, classis or synod. “The ministers of God’s Word, and the elders and deacons, ought to be chosen to their respective offices by a lawful election by the church.” This is good and proper. Only the local congregation, who know their own particular needs, can determine for themselves who their pastor should be. Only the members of the local congregation can elect their own elders and deacons. The elders and deacons must be fellow members of the congregation who know the flock and are able to minister to their spiritual needs. Peter speaks about this when he addresses the elders thus: “The elders which are *among you* ... Feed the flock of God which is *among you*” (1 Pet. 5:1-2). How could a man who is imposed against the will of the congregation know the flock? Second, no man may impose himself upon the congregation. This was a problem in the days of the Reformation. Men felt themselves “called” to preach and started thrusting themselves forward. But a man must be called through the church and by the church to be properly called by God. This, too, is part of the good order and discipline demanded by Christ in His church. Paul explains this principle in Romans 10: “How shall they preach, except they be sent?” (v15).

The process for appointing officebearers is not set forth in all its details in Scripture. However, the principles are easy to determine and to follow. First, the Scriptures describe for us the kind of men we should seek, men who have certain spiritual qualifications (1 Tim 3:1-13; Tit 1:5-9). Let not the election of officebearers be a popularity contest! Let it not be determined by who has the most money! Second, the Scriptures demand that these men be examined (“proved”) by the congregation (1 Tim 3:10). Only after such examination and election can men say that they have been appointed by the church—and therefore by Christ Himself—to their respective offices.

October 31 – That Order Which The Word of God Teacheth
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

I Timothy 3:10: ““And let these also first be proved ...”

In Acts 13, the church in Antioch was fasting and praying, seeking the will of the Lord. The Holy Spirit said “Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them” (v2). In response to the Holy Spirit’s commandment, the church in Antioch “fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them [and] sent them away” (v3). When Paul and Barnabas—and later Paul and Silas—returned from their missionary journeys, they reported to the church in Antioch concerning the work they had done (Acts 14:26-28, 15:40, 18:22-23).

From all this, we can draw several conclusions. First, the Holy Spirit calls a man to his office in the church, but He does not do this without the church. Acts 13:2 says that the Holy Spirit called Paul and Barnabas. Acts 13:3 says that the church in Antioch sent them out. And Acts 13:4 interprets this as their being “sent forth by the Holy Ghost.” The same is true of the elders in Ephesus. Paul reminds them that the Holy Spirit had made them overseers (Acts 20:28). Yet Acts 14:23 makes clear that the Spirit used the call *through the church* to place such elders—and by implication also ministers and deacons—into their offices. Second, elders should only be chosen after prayer—and even after fasting (Acts 13:1-3, 14:23). Art. 31 has such passages in mind when it urges the church to elect officebearers “with calling upon the name of the Lord.” Only by humbling ourselves before God and seeking His direction will we be enabled to elect godly officebearers. The Bible teaches us that God gives unsuitable officebearers to His church in His wrath when we are unfaithful to Him. One needs only to think of King Saul: “I gave thee a king in mine anger, and took him away in my wrath” (Hos 13:11). Third, the election of officebearers is as spiritual an activity as any other ecclesiastical business. That is why God gives the *spiritual* characteristics of ministers, elders and deacons. You will look in vain for the qualifications that modern churches seek: today a man must be a good communicator, a people pleaser, a good organizer and coordinator, a team player and a charismatic leader. God bypasses all those qualities—some of which might be useful in an officebearer—and insists that officebearers be *godly*. Blamelessness, gravity, sobriety, honesty, fidelity in the family and soundness in faith are the indispensable qualifications for a minister, elder or deacon. Other gifts and talents may be useful—and could even be developed by a man—but godliness is vital. These are not the qualifications of a president or a manager but they are the qualifications of an officebearer in Christ’s church. Fourth, the men who are elected to be officebearers must be “proved” (tested and examined) for their fitness. Paul warns that no novice—one new to the faith and therefore lacking in experience and spiritual maturity—should be chosen. This election of men to the offices should not be with undue haste (I Tim 3:6, 10; 5:22).

When the election of officebearers happens according to this careful biblical pattern, we can be sure of God’s blessing. When ungodly men are selected, the results will be disastrous.

November 1 – The Need for a Lawful Call
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

Romans 10:15: “And how shall they preach, except they be sent?...”

The church needs ministers so that the Word of God is preached. Ministers are the gift of the ascended Christ who gives these officebearers to His church for her spiritual good (Eph 4:11). The question is, *how* does Christ give pastors to His church? The answer is, as Art. 31 explains it, that a man “is bound to wait till it shall please God to call him.”

The lawful call of a man to the ministry is twofold. First, the man will feel a subjective call. This is a desire to serve Christ in the office of minister. This desire, if it is a genuine call of Christ upon the life of that man, will not be a desire for glory, power or wealth. Nor will this call come about through undue external force or pressure. What Peter writes concerning elders applies equally to ministers because ministers are elders, teaching elders (see I Tim 5:17). “Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind. Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being examples to the flock” (I Pet 5:2-3). Notice, firstly, the office should not be forced upon a man against his will by the pressure of others (“not by constraint”). Secondly, the office should not be sought for monetary gain (“not for filthy lucre”). Thirdly, that the office must not be desired for selfish ambition (“neither as being lords over God’s heritage”). Rather a young man will have a desire to serve Christ by feeding His flock. Such a young man will notice—and usually his fellow saints will notice it also—the presence of certain gifts for the ministry, and he will seek to develop those gifts for use in the pastorate.

But that is not enough. For many, this subjective call might *seem* like enough. Here is a young man. He feels called to serve Christ. But that cannot be enough. The church must have a role in determining the fitness of a man to occupy the office. No man can know himself to be called until he receives the external call from a local congregation. “That he may have testimony of his calling and be certain and assured that it is of the Lord” says Art. 31. This principle is found in Scripture. About the deacons—and therefore also about the ministers and elders—Paul writes, “And let these also first be proved” (I Tim 3:10). In addition, Paul warns, “lay hands suddenly on no man” (I Tim 5:22). That word “proved” means examined or tested with a view to determine fitness. Scripture does not specify how this examination should take place. In Reformed churches, a man is proved by rigorous seminary training followed by an examination before the church. The principle for this is found in II Timothy 2:2, “And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also.” When the church is not able to have its own seminary, “on the job” training is provided for promising candidates. This was how Timothy and Titus were prepared for the ministry.

The important point is that the ordination of men by the laying on of hands (I Tim 5:22; II Tim 1:6) must not happen with undue haste. In this way, God will give to the church for her edification, men who desire the office in sincerity.

**November 2 – No Intrusion by Indecent Means
by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

III John 9: "...but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence ..."

Selfish ambition and pride are sins which have plagued the church from her earliest days. There have been in the history of the church, both in the Old and New Testaments, those who have sought to exalt themselves as leaders without a call from God. Moses, the meekest of all men (Num 12:3), and one who was called directly by God, saw his leadership challenged on several occasions. First, his brother and sister opposed him in Numbers 12. God struck Miriam with leprosy and Moses had to pray for her. Later, a more serious rebellion brewed in the wilderness with Korah, Dathan and Abiram (Num 16:3). Judgment was swift and terrible upon the rebels. They were swallowed up by the earth (Num 16:32-35; Psa 106:16-18; Jude 11)! When God rebukes false prophets, He says that He did not send them: they spoke without His authority (Jer 14:14-15). In the New Testament, Paul warns women not to usurp the offices (I Tim 2:12). Art. 31 warns against a usurpation of office out of pride or some other base motive: "Therefore every one must take heed not to intrude himself by indecent means."

In his third epistle, the apostle John named a proud man called Diotrephes. We do not know how Diotrephes became an officebearer in the church. Perhaps he desired money, power or prestige. Perhaps he desired to have the praise of men and to be popular. John said of him that he "loveth to have the preeminence" (v9). This is a terrible indictment of the man. In all things Christ must have the preeminence (Col 1:18). How different Diotrephes' attitude was, from John the Baptist: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). Because Diotrephes loved the preeminence, he opposed any whom he perceived to be a threat to his power in the church. John wrote, "neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church" (III John 10).

There are men like Diotrephes in the church in every age. His name stands as a warning to us. Some of these men desire the office of the church but they are never elected. They then do everything in their power to undermine the work of the lawful officebearers. They become the chief critics in the congregation. Their envy embitters them. A Diotrephes in the pulpit, consistory or diaconate is worse. The churches must be vigilant not to allow a Diotrephes to gain a position of authority where he can do damage to the congregation. One way in which this can be done is by heeding Paul's warning in I Timothy 3:6, "Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil." A novice is a recent convert. To thrust such a man into office—even with the best of intentions—could be ruinous for that man.

The greatest enemies of the church creep in using indecent means to gain a position of influence (Acts 20:29-30; Gal 2:4; Eph 4:14; Jude 4). Such men have no love for Jesus Christ or His sheep. Therefore, in the important task of calling officebearers, we must take heed that we do not intrude ourselves or permit others to intrude themselves by such indecent means.

Let us wait upon the Lord to give us officebearers for our good.

November 3 – The Equality of Officebearers
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

I Peter 5:3: “Neither as being lords over God’s heritage...”

We have seen several important principles of Reformed church government. First, there must be officebearers, men whom Christ calls through the church and to whom Christ gives real, spiritual authority. Second, there must be a plurality of officebearers, lest too much power be concentrated in one man. In the multitude of counselors there is safety. Third, there is no hierarchy, that is, in the church of Christ there are no offices higher than others. Fundamentally, then, a bishop is not a higher ranking office than an elder. The offices in Christ’s church of pastor, elder and deacon are distinct, but one office is not “above” the other.

The same is true of the individual officebearers. “As for the ministers of God’s Word, they have equally the same power and authority wheresoever they are, as they are all ministers of Christ” is the explanation of Art. 31. This means that the church must not have senior pastors, associate pastors, assistant pastors or other kinds of pastors. All pastors have the same office. Each of them has the authority to preach, baptise and administer the Lord’s Supper. One pastor may be more experienced, better gifted and more popular than another but they are equal in office. The church must be careful not to put one pastor above another. Paul warns of this attitude in I Corinthians 1:12, “Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided ...?” and again in I Corinthians 3:3-4, “For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal?”

The minister has his authority from Christ, and all ministers have that same authority. But Christ only permits a man to preach as He sends by the church. A man is accountable to the consistory of elders of that church. Thus a man preaches with the permission and under the supervision of the elders. When a man preaches in another congregation, he must have the permission of the elders of that congregation. He may not thrust himself upon a congregation without the elders.

The same equality of office is true of elders and deacons. No elder may lord over a fellow elder. Every elder in the consistory—or at a broader assembly at which he is called to be a delegate—has equal right to speak and to vote. No deacon may assume an authoritarian attitude over the other deacons.

Let hierarchy in all its forms be rejected by Reformed churches. Let us be servants of one another and of the Lord.

November 4 – Christ, the Only Universal Bishop and Head
by Rev. Martyn McGeown

I Peter 2:25: “For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.”

Art. 31 reminds us that all officebearers are servants of Christ and that He is “the only universal Bishop, and the only Head of the church.” This creedal statement is an answer to the pretensions of the Roman Catholic pope.

The Roman Catholic Church makes very exaggerated claims for her popes. “The Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as vicar of Christ, namely, and as pastor of the entire church, has full, supreme and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 882) These claims are based on several arguments. First, Peter was the prince of the apostles, the first bishop of Rome and the subsequent bishops of Rome are his rightful successors and exercise the supremacy which Christ gave to Peter. This argument has no basis in Scripture. Peter never claimed such supremacy for himself and the other apostles never suggested it. Furthermore, there is no evidence that Peter was ever the bishop of Rome. Second, there is, the Roman Catholic Church argues, an unbroken succession of bishops from Peter to the present pope. This argument, even if it were true—and history denies it—is irrelevant. A succession of persons does not guarantee a succession of gifts and authority. In fact, history shows that many of the popes were monsters of iniquity. Third, Rome claims lofty titles for her popes, titles which belong to God, such as Holy Father and His holiness (see John 17:11). Other titles which the pope claims are Supreme Pontiff, which means the Bridge between God and men; Vicar of Christ, which means one who stands in the place of Christ; the Head of the church on earth; and universal bishop.

Especially in the Middle Ages, the power of the popes in Rome was very great. The pope claimed the sovereign right to appointed bishops and even to depose kings who opposed him. At the pope’s command, our spiritual forefathers were put to death. The popes of Rome are indeed “drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus” (Rev 17:6). As recently as 1870, the pope has been declared infallible when he speaks on faith and morals. There is little wonder that the Reformers viewed the pope, who usurped the power of both church and state, as the Antichrist. Certainly, the pope is an antichrist, and every Reformed believer must reject his blasphemous claims.

Christ did not place one man over His church. He did not appoint one man to be universal bishop. That title He reserves for Himself. He is the only Head, the Bishop, the Mediator and the Saviour of His church. For her welfare, He has appointed a plurality of officebearers of equal rank. For these reasons, we reject the pope. We will not allow ourselves or our churches to be brought again under such bondage.

**November 5 – The Esteem We Should Have for God’s Officebearers
by Rev. Martyn McGeown**

I Thessalonians 5:12-13: “And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; And to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake. And be at peace among yourselves.”

How do you view your pastor, your elders and your deacons? Art. 31, quoting I Thessalonians 5, urges us to “esteem the ministers of God’s Word and the elders of the church very highly for their work’s sake.”

If the officebearers have been chosen as the Word of God determines, they will be godly. Therefore, before they are officebearers, they are your brethren in the Lord. No unbeliever may be a member—and certainly no unbeliever may be an officebearer—in the church of Jesus Christ. Moreover, the officebearers have been elected by the congregation in a majority vote, and approved by the congregation. Therefore they have been lawfully called. This is true, even if the men you desired in office did not receive sufficient votes. You had, at the time of election, the opportunity to raise any lawful objections with the consistory. If there were no lawful objections, you must consider that these men in office are a gift of the ascended Christ to you (Eph 4:11). Therefore you are called to obey them and submit to them in the Lord (Heb 13:17). This is profitable for you, because these men occupy the office for your edification.

In I Thessalonians 5:12-13, Paul urges the believers in Thessalonica to receive their officebearers. We can apply this instruction to our own churches. First, we must know them (v12). This should not be difficult for us because—especially in the case of elders and deacons—these men were, even before their election to office, members of the congregation. They lived and worked among us. Perhaps it is more difficult with respect to the pastor. Often he comes from the seminary or is called from another church. But we must make the effort to know him. The pastor and his family will be keen to know the congregation—all the congregation. Second, we must recognize their work. Paul calls it labour. The word means toil. Pastors, elders and deacons work hard to carry out the calling of their respective offices. Pray for them in their work and show them that their work is appreciated by you and your children. Third, we must esteem them very highly. This esteem is the esteem of honour or reverence. We do this not because they have a nice personality—by all means let the officebearers be affable, approachable, friendly men—but for their work’s sake. We recognize the importance of the work. Where would we be without the preaching, without catechism instruction for our children, without pastoral care, without oversight, without the compassionate work of the deacons? We would stand exposed to every false teaching and be tossed to and fro, easy prey for deceivers who seek to destroy the church (Eph 4:14). Fourth, we must love them. It is amazing how quickly a bond of love forms between the officebearers and the people. When the people see that the officebearers care—genuinely care—for their souls, they will love the officebearers greatly in return.

Finally, the greatest gift we can give the officebearers is to walk in the truth. John writes, “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth” (III John 4). Do not only believe the truth—that is the foundation—but also walk in the truth. Let the truth mould your life, your relationships, your marriage, your children and your work.

This will make it true joy for your officebearers to labour among you.

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