

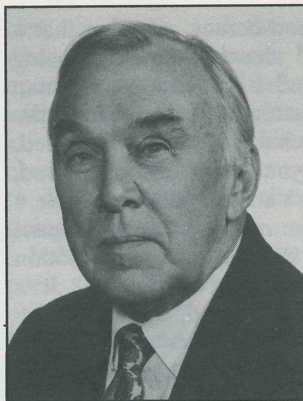
believers actually do stand under the Scriptures as our supreme authority. Do the Scriptures actually have this kind of authority in all areas of our life and practice? In the next article of this series I would like to turn to this test directly, addressing several popular ways in which this confession is being compromised among us today.

Footnotes:

¹This is a different emphasis from that of Report 44. Report 44 argued that the authority of the Word of God is "qualified" by its redemptive content. This has been the occasion, as I shall argue in a subsequent article, for a view which *limits* Scripture's authority arbitrarily to "those matters which pertain to my salvation." My emphasis here is upon the reality of *Christ's speaking* in the Scriptures. This is why obedient listening to the Word may serve as a true test of discipleship (compare John 8:31, "If you abide in My Word, then you are truly disciples of Mine").

²It is interesting to note that the synodical study committee on the "Inspiration and Infallibility of the Bible," received by the CRC Synod of 1971, underscored the strength of the word "infallibility" and its evident relation to the word "inerrant" (*Acts of Synod*, 1971). It simply makes no sense to affirm the "infallibility" of the Scriptures, while denying their "inerrancy." This report therefore also argued that it was inconsonant with our confession in the *Belgic Confession* and the Bible's own testimony to speak of the "errancy" of the Scriptural texts.

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SYNOD-OCRACY: CAUSE AND CURE — I Where We Are

Lester DeKoster

Synod of '90 sent a shock wave across the CRC.

Synod did so by reaching over into your congregation to make you "an equal opportunity employer." Without so much as "by your leave," synod opened the Lord's pulpit and consistory table in your congregation to women. Church offices created by divine appointment, to be occupied on divine prescription, were handed over to radical feminism. This ideology called the tune: synod danced to that music. There is to be final celebration of this aberration by *Synod '92*.

Did you, friends, sit meekly by and let it happen? Do you take it for granted that synods have the right to make such intrusion upon the churches? Are you afraid that even asking such a question will be labeled "congregationalism"? As if that really mattered.

This, and two following articles, will try to face such questions, and suggest answers.

You have noticed, no doubt, that some churches refuse to be synod's vassals. They, it appears, are jumping-the-gun already, and seating women as elders, installing women as adjunct pastors. The synodical drummer does not measure their steps. They declare their freedom from synodical dictation. That they do so for the wrong reasons (in rebellion, not obedience to the Word) and for the wrong end (bowing to radical feminism) must not obscure the fact that in principle they are right! And have something, therefore, to teach us who may just be formulating yet another overture in obedience to the bureaucracy. Bear that in mind, I suggest, as we go along. It is of crucial importance.

These articles are addressed to those who perceive that the health of a whole civilization depends, finally, upon the orthodoxy of its churches. And that the

orthodoxy of the churches depends, as the Reformation was fought to demonstrate, upon the realization of an immediate responsibility to the Word of the Lord, without the intervention of Pope, bishop, priest, classis or synod or bureaucracy. There is unmistakable correlation between the decay of biblical authority in the churches, reflected among us in what I shall call synod-ocracy, and the collapse of public morality on the streets. Calvinist history testifies to that.

What I propose is that we get to fundamentals, and rediscover who, by inheritance, the Reformed churches are. Let's try, in the words of the ancient philosopher, to see things steadily and to see them whole. If we succeed, the answer to "What do we do now?" troubling so many, need not be obscure. The answer is, in a word, directed especially at each congregation: *be yourself once again! Exercise the freedom for which Christ has made us free* (Gal. 5:1)! Toss off the yoke which synod-ocracy has fastened upon us.



But over there is someone eager to say that synod '90 was not dictatorial. Synod generously gave us a choice. It did not (for now) oblige you to fill your church offices with women.

Quite so. Perhaps to soothe the pain of transition, synod left the force of its intrusion optional—for the time being (but how foolish to forget that what synods give, synods can take away!). Note well, however, that even in this concession synod made clear who is the boss: do you want women in office? Install them because, and when, *Synod* authorizes it! Don't you (now) want women in office? Thank the *Boss* for graciously conceding local option. And be grateful to synod '90 for deferring the final ultimatum to '92. It's synod all the way.

You do see, I trust, that synod of '90 simply assumed that supposedly "Reformed" synods may act like Roman Catholic bishops, issuing mandates from the "top" down. And you do see, I hope, that this assumption is a complete reversal of the Reformation! And no excuses for such synodical autocracy will make things right among us until we do another "reformation" ourselves, by a rediscovery of what being "Reformed" really is. In short, by recognizing the seat of authority as lodged by the Lord in His Word, to be exercised in the churches, not in classes or synods but in the local congregation.

One other thing.

Synod '90 was able to thrust its will upon the churches, in opening offices to women, by making a weapon out of the *Church Order*. Just a slight change in the wording of Article 3 does the job: from "confessing male members" being eligible for office to "confessing members" being so. The *Church Order* triggers a tremor across the CRC which sprang open office doors to women—and set many serious members to thinking of opening a door for themselves into other pastures. But the grass never is really greener. Why not bring back a new springtime among ourselves?

So, let us attend to it: the *Church Order* can become the long arm of synodical tyranny. Some may like that; others may not. In either case, that's the way it is, as synod '90 showed us. Until the *Church Order* is re-set in its place, freedom will be in jeopardy among us.

For, as things are, whatever your choice, to install or not to install women in office, you march to synod's commands with the *Church Order* as synod's badge of authority. It's like being at the circus, say, with synod holding the big hoop and every congregation leaping through it one way or t'other. And the synodical ringmaster has a long whip, the *Church Order*, in hand. *Jump!*

Not, to be sure, that every delegate to synod '90 saw what he participated in as tyranny in action, with the *Church Order* as cat-o'-nine-tails poised over the bent backs of local churches, including his own. But so it was! We may presume that the bureaucracy which hovers over every facet of synodical behavior knew what was up, as they say. It's time you found out, too.

Call it synod-ocracy, meaning that a "Reformed" denomination is being slowly twisted back into the Roman Catholic pattern from which the Reformed churches were liberated. From over your congregation's head, as from the Vatican, falls as it were a papal decree: *open offices to women!* Now, where did a synod get the notion that it has the right to do that? It is authorized, 'tis argued, by the *Church Order*. Synod-ocracy! A retrogression to a tyranny which the Reformation was waged to destroy.

WHAT IS THE CHURCH ORDER?

Not everyone has much attended to learning what the *Church Order* does in the churches. It is, now-a-days, worth your while to find out.

Let us pause briefly over it.

"Synod '90 sent a shock wave . . . by reaching over into your congregation to make you an 'equal opportunity employer.'"

Reformed *Church Order* got its start with the first Reformed synod, held in Paris, 1559. The Reformed churches were then something new in the world. Calvin was still living; persecution of Calvinists often filled the air with the stench of burning flesh. What was this new thing, braving "fire, dungeons and sword"?

The *Church Order* arose to answer that question. It is a kind of anatomy, or skeleton, of the way Reformed Christians decided to put their house in order. They believed that God likes it that way in His churches (I Cor. 14:40—"all things decently and in order"). Just say that a *Church Order* describes how churches govern themselves and how local churches can relate to each other, sharing the same government. It is not a constitution, not a covenant, not a source of authority.

A *Church Order* is simply a mirror reflecting how the churches using it understand themselves to behave. So, the *Order* specifies the offices Reformed believers acknowledge God as instituting in their churches; it indicates the ways churches meet together for mutual counsel and support in classes and synods; it describes how local churches do business at worship, in instruction, and in discipline. That's all.

It's a profile, a self-image in terms of details of behavior.

Of necessity a *Church Order* is descriptive, not prescriptive. That is because it has no authority, cannot command obedience with "Thus saith the Lord!" How could it? The Lord rules His Church, Calvin said, "by the scepter of His Word." That Word provides authority to the offices which it both creates and defines. But nowhere does the Word endow a *Church Order* with authority, much as synodocrats would have it so.

Denominations would all like to claim biblical authorizations for their forms of church government. Endless, but futile, efforts have long been made by Roman Catholics and Episcopalians (think of Episcopal Richard Hooker's massive *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, designed to show the British Episcopalians right as opposed to the Puritans of his 16th century) to validate biblically their hierarchical form of church order. Presbyterians (Cunningham, Bannerman), Congregationalists, Independents, and the sectarians, too, have sought to find in the Bible authorization of the "order" they maintain. The struggle divided supporters of Cromwell in his time (the 1640s) with Owen, Baxter, Milton, and Generals Ireton and Cromwell himself, along with the Westminster divines, all in on the argument. The conclusion always comes up the same: church orders *do not* enjoy divinely endowed authority. They *describe*, not *prescribe*.

It follows that among the Reformed churches the so-called "major" or "higher" assemblies which a *Church Order* may (does not have to) provide for, derive no authority from the *Church Order* to "lord it over" the local churches. An *Order* has no authority to confer.

In fact, only the local churches bear the "marks" of the church; only the local churches enjoy the offices appointed by the Lord; only the local churches hold the keys of the kingdom of heaven; only the local churches are entrusted with the authority of the Word. They are *the church*! Your congregation may decline to exercise the authority entrusted to you, thus denying the freedom won for you in Christ and at the Reformation. You may be derelict in duty, but you cannot delegate divinely assigned authority to

any other body; it is not yours to pass around.

It is time to see clearly, then, that our classes, synods, boards, agencies, bureaucrats, committees *are not* the church. They are the churches' servants. This is unfortunately obscured when we speak of the Christian Reformed Church, thus attaching a loyalty to entities which are not the church at all. Far wiser in this respect is the Dutch phrase "Reformed churches." We need to learn that the term "Christian Reformed Church" is useful shorthand; but only the local congregations are the churches.

When the precious liberty won for every congregation is exercised once again among us, much of the haze that has settled upon the relation of your local church to other churches using the same *Order*, and to so-called "higher" or "major" assemblies, will be cleared away. And the effort of synods to "lord it over" the churches, using the *Church Order* as their scepter, will be rejected as crypto-catholicism which it is. And comes such a day, we will recognize that those churches which have jumped the gun on synod 90's decision, and installed women in their offices, have something to teach the rest of us. In form, they are correct in rejecting synodical authority—let us learn from it; but in content, their action is predicated on their own rebellion, not on the authority of God's Word—let us be warned against it. Genuine independence roots only in the Scriptures.

SYNOD-OCRACY?

Let us be clear about it, then.

We suffer from the advent of synodocracy.

Just say that its a form of domination that comes into existence as a nominally Reformed denomination gets twisted slowly but surely into a copy of a Roman Catholic diocese, dominated by a bishop, with unalterable edicts coming from the "top" to be *obeyed* by the churches "below." That is synodocracy. It's here. In June only the blind failed to behold it at work. Come '92 not even the blind can ignore its existence. Still more, once the principles of so-called "Vision 21" take hold, what Luther once called "the Babylon captivity of the churches" will be complete among us.

It happens, not by accident, that synodocracy increasingly serves the bureaucracies, the boards, the agen-

cies, the staffs and the committees, who are not the church but depend upon the churches to bankroll their existence. The churches are coming to exist largely to pay the bills of the not-church, the whole structure grown up to do what local churches should be doing themselves.

Indeed, synodocracy shows up most persistently in the denominational tax called the "quota system." If ever a Luther demanded liberation for the churches from the tax called indulgences, we need another Brother Martin now to liberate the local congregation from the tax called quotas. If ever a Calvin railed against the abuses of councils, we need now awake to what synodocracy is doing in the CRC. Ironical, isn't it, that to Luther at Worms the Bishops said, "Recant!" while to your congregation, the 'bishops' of classis and synod say, "Pay up!" Birds of a feather!

And what was Luther's or Calvin's reply? "Show me from Scripture!" It must be our position again! There will be no true freedom from synodocracy among us until the churches say, "Show us from the Scripture!" over edicts which synods lay upon their backs. "Show us" where the Word authorizes synods to open church office to women! "Show us" where the Word authorizes synods to levy taxes upon the churches! "Show us" where the Word gives authority to the *Church Order*. The day such echoes of the Reformation are heard from your congregation in chorus with many others will be the dawn of liberation for the CRC. And you will serve the Lord better by bringing that day to pass in the denomination than by running away!

Cause and Cure

Let us, then, take a cool look at where we have come. Then let us ask what that means, and how to deal with the situation.

Next time.

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Theme:

AND GOD SAID

KEYNOTE SPEAKERS

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Dr. Joel Nederhood

**GOD HAS
NO PRESS AGENT**

Saturday — 9:00 a.m.

Dr. Norman Shepherd

**WOMEN IN THE
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