



## SYNODOCRACY: CAUSE AND CURE (II)

Lester DeKoster

Synod '90 sent a massive church-quake across the CRC, high on the ecclesiastical Richter scale, with its epicenter on the Calvin campus in Grand Rapids.

The quake sprang open the doors of local church office to women, pending confirmation by Synod '92. Its violence set some congregations to thinking of fleeing the denomination. Its artificial waiting period set other congregations to kicking over the traces and installing women as elders and adjunct ministers now. It stimulated other congregations to devising yet another overture asking for churchquake reversal. And it shocked some congregations into asking how the CRC ever got to the point where a synod behaved like a Roman Catholic bishop sending down decrees to his parishes. That, we are saying, is what synodocracy is.

### PICTURE IT FOR YOURSELF

To see for yourself just where we are, suppose you take two sheets of blank paper. On each one you are going to draw a little chart of church government, or say of "church order."

*Chart I:* Draw the Roman Catholic system as you recall it. There will be, of course, the Pope at the *top*, lines of authority going *down* by way of the archbishops and bishops through the priests to local parishes at the *bottom*. So it is, and so it was also at the time of the Reformation; power all at the top while the parish footed the bills and did as told from above. That is the authority-structure the Reformation was fought to shatter, to free those congregations which want to be free. Do you?

*Chart II:* Now draw what instinctively comes to mind as the CRC system, as it exists.

It is safe to wager that your Chart II, if made in the light of what has been happening among us, will look like

this: Synod at the *top*, then lines of authority *down* to classes, and finally down to local congregations at the *bottom*. Synods "say," the churches pay, and the bureaucracies reap the profits. Yes, that's the way it has become among us.

BUT, your two charts are essentially alike! You have outlined almost identical church orders. Our system is being perverted into what the Reformation shattered!

The CRC has become like the autocracy which made Reformation necessary. "Your new *presbyter*," said Milton to the synodocrats of his time, "is but old *Priest*, writ large." So are our synods, power at the "top," subversion at the "bottom." Edicts coming down, money flowing up. That, for us, is synodocracy! It was for our spiritual forebears, cause for long, bitter, costly struggle. Ours is becoming an undoing of the Reformation. Synod '90 was not running far ahead of the times; it pushed the clock back almost 500 years.

By our own indifference—no point in blaming anyone else!—we are dissipating the freedom won us by Calvinism. We are throwing away the hard-won heritage of the Reformation. And that is not an innocent dereliction of duty.

### SYNODOCRACY HAS CONSEQUENCES

Consider what Synod '90 did to your congregation along with the "option" to install women in every office.

*First*, from now on, every agitator for women-in-office in your congregation can appeal over the head of your consistory to the edict coming out of Grand Rapids, as from Rome: *Synod has spoken!* Or as the papacy still puts it: *ipse dixit*—he has spoken!! Who are you, pastor or elder, it can be said, as opposed to the authority of synod?

(Your appropriate answer is that the Word gives no authority to synods. They are not even listed among the marks of the church. But are you ready to give that answer, and meet the counter-arguments? Let's look at that, in a moment, together.)

*Second*, and yet worse: from now on, every affirmation of the inspired and infallible authority of the Bible made in your congregation, by minister or consistory, can be countered by the behavior of Synod '90. It conspicuously set the Bible aside to wedge women into office. Synod vaguely appealed to signs of the times, to leading of the Spirit, but not to the Bible—for the obvious reason that the Bible says NO to what synod did. And that sets a pattern already bearing the fruit of ignoring or flatly rejecting the Word to promote radical feminism.

In short, synodocracy not only imposes a tyranny upon the churches, but it makes a mockery of the authority of pulpit and consistory in every congregation.

### NOT THE FIRST TIME

And by now you are reminded of another synodical denigration of biblical authority among us, done in '88. That synod decreed that the evolutionary theory of man's descent from the animal is, mind you, quite in harmony with Genesis and at home in our Confessions! And do you recall the after-shock? From then on, parents and consistories lost effective control over every form of evolutionary fantasy enunciated in school and congregation.

You want a school board to protect your children against Darwin? Who are you? *Synod* approves! You want Genesis preached as literal Truth? Who are you? *Synod* gives its imprimatur to passing the Bible by. Heresy on synodical holiday.

Synodocracy is recipe for anarchy! And anarchy flourishes among us! Anything can be said with impunity, and is. Shocking denial of Bible and Confession appears in print. You expect some disciplinary reaction? There is none! When authority is usurped by synods, there is left an authority vacuum in the local congregation. Exactly what Geneva, for example, well understood. If the Bible is to be the authority in the local congregation, then neither Pope, nor council nor synod can tyrannize over the local church. So it must come to be among



us again, if spreading anarchy is to be curbed.

But how do we make it that way?

First, we counter the arguments synodocrats use to justify their autocracies. Second, and next time, we look at things as they ought to be in the light of our tradition.

#### THE SYNODOCRATS' QUIVER

We have to examine the arrows which synodocracy stores in its quiver to attack those who criticize it. It may be encouraging to see how blunt and useless they really are. We will number them.

##### Arrow 1: "Settled and Binding..."

There is, first of all, that neat little weapon phrased in Article 29 of the *Church Order*:

"The decisions of assemblies shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order."

Now, there's a stone for David's sling. It seems to authorize synods to lay "settled and binding" decrees upon the churches; and, it seems to limit the churches' response to "proving" that synod acted in conflict with "the Word of God or Church Order."

Heads, synods dictate; tails, churches take the dictation.

In passing, observe that you would have expected any article in a "Reformed" *Church Order* to read like this: "unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the *Forms of Unity*," right? Note, then, how the *Church Order* not only sets itself on a par with the Bible, but wishes to be viewed in place of the *Forms of Unity*. This is not a stone for David's sling; it is a boulder for synodical autocracy.

But, it's just a papier-mache boulder. Even the *Church Order* itself reveals that.

Observe, first, that the language of Article 29 is just the kind of vague and easily manipulated stuff that synodocrats appreciate. For example, "settled and binding" on whom? Where does it say, "on your congregation"? And how could it? Where would a synod get such sweeping authority? And, "unless it is proved...." Proved by whom and proved to whom? And who is the presumably impartial judge of that? (You know, of course, it's the bureaucracy or another synod.)

What the synocrat reads into this loose phrasing, of course, is all to his

benefit: "settled and binding" upon you, the churches, unless "it is proved" by you to us! And we, not you, will decide that!

##### Arrow 2: Roadblocks To Appeal

And so what happens?

When you reflect on it, the unbelievable happens. Churches knuckle under. All the *Church Order* allows is that churches, mind you, come crawling to synods, mind you, begging to be heard! How do you suppose the early Calvinists would view that?

How many serious consistories struggle earnestly, year by year, to formulate overtures addressed to synods, trying first to get them by the bureaucrats, and then seriously considered on the floor.

But the overture route is the path which the *Church Order* provides for synod's protecting their papal status. You come; you kneel; and perhaps his excellency will grant you an audience.

The *Church Order* generously allows for this in Article 30: "Assemblies and church members may appeal to the assembly next in order if they believe that injustice has been done or that a decision conflicts with the Word of God or the Church Order. Appellants should observe all ecclesiastical regulations regarding manner and time of appeal."

That is ominous enough, because if some bureaucrat thinks you did not "observe all ecclesiastical regulations" (made by synods, of course), out goes your overture! And, just for good measure, there is this added hooker:

##### Arrow 3: "Sufficient And New"

"A request for revision of a decision shall be submitted to the assembly which made the decision. Such a request shall be honored only if sufficient and new grounds for reconsideration are presented" (Art. 31).

Do you catch the implication of this weasel-worded article? First, behold the status allotted to your congregation: who makes a "request" to someone else? Only the inferior to the superior, only the lesser to the greater! You concede yourself this status so soon as you send in an overture. But that is not the status of local churches in the Reformed system! Not really, as we shall see.

Second, who determines if your overture does in fact bring out "sufficient and new grounds for reconsideration"? What does "sufficient"

really mean? What would "new" be? All this in the hands of the synodocrats.

In some games this would be called playing with a stacked deck—and not in your favor!

Think of all the carefully formulated overtures sent "up" from the churches regarding the whole women-in-office issue in the past decade. And consider what has been the fate of these well-meant appeals. Some were bureaucratically discarded along the way—nothing new. Some were swept off the floor of synod in almost the twinkling of an eye. And what appeal remained to you when your best overture effected nothing, or never even made it to the bishop's throne?

None at all. Synod is its own jury, judge and executioner—off with your overture's head!

The *Church Order* provides for no other alternative. And this is what sets congregations thinking about leaving, of course.

*How can this be possible?*

How can churches thinking themselves wrought in the heritage of Luther and Calvin come crawling on hand and knee, pleading to be heard by the new synodocratic bishop? And when turned rudely away, go back to bathing their knees for yet another appeal?

What, then, can be done?

Quite simply, a return to the heritage we have let slip from the churches' fingers.

To begin with:

#### HAVE YOU NEVER MET...?

Article 29 of the *Church Order* seems never to have met Article 95 of the same *Order*. Perhaps it is because synodocrats carefully avoid introducing the one Article to the other.

We have met Article 29, the "settled and binding" one. Here is Article 95: "No church shall in any way lord it over another church, and no office-bearer shall lord it over another office-bearer."

"Lord it over" is not perfectly clear language, but it certainly rules out synodocracy. It is a phrase of long standing, having in view exactly the kind of tyranny which bishops once exercised, and synodocracy exercises among us now.

#### EQUAL, BUT NOT MORE EQUAL

Ever since Calvin (*Inst.* IV. III. 7), it has been Reformed polity that all



churches, and all office-bearers are equal. This is because the Lord rules *through* the offices, not by them, as Calvin will emphasize in our last article. Office-bearers have no authority vested in themselves, and so have none to bring to a classis or synod. And so we rightly say in the *Church Order* that no church officer, and no congregation, may "lord it over" another. Not because the *Church Order* says so, but because that is how the Lord structures His church, namely so that all are equally subject to the authority of the same Word, which elevates none above the other. This is settled and binding, and empties the synodocratic quiver of all its arrows at once.

Equality in office, under the Word, was—and is—a crucial issue in the clash between Reformed and Catholic church orders. Catholic church orders, and Episcopal too, hold that there are superiors and inferiors among the clergy. This was Richard Hooker's contention against the Calvinists in England of his time (1590s). It is the root of hierarchical tyranny. The Reformation did not find the relation of superior-to-inferior in the Bible, and saw it as the deadly enemy of congregational freedom. Hence the emphasis upon no "lording over another."

Observe how synodocracy appears at once, now, in a new light. It becomes, one sees, a kind of marvelous thing, reminding one of *Alice In Wonderland*. Consider it carefully.

#### SOMETHING OUT OF NOTHING

Last June there was a synodical meeting in Grand Rapids. Who came to it? Well, there were 180 delegates, and a swarm of bureaucrats, maybe outnumbering and certainly working over the delegates.

But with what authority did each delegate come? What rights did he have over another? None! What authority did each delegate have over all other office-bearers among all the churches? None! What authority did each congregation from which delegates came have over other congregations? None!

How come, then, that 180 delegates who come with no authority over anyone else conspire together to lord it over everybody?

#### EQUAL MEANS EQUAL!

Let's repeat: that's what the Reformation was all about. *No church, no office-bearer shall lord it over another!*

People fought for that; people went to prison for it; people suffered and died for it. Article 95 might well be read at the opening of every synodical session. And, friend, *article 95 might well be read at every meeting of your consistory and congregation!* Get it right: no other church, no other office-bearer, no classis or synod, no church visitor, no synodical deputy, nobody at all is authorized to lord it over your church! Can you behave as if that were true, instead of forgotten? You need not wait for some bureaucracy, or some classis, or some synod to say it's so. *That's the way it is.* It's the "church order" heart of our heritage.

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*"The congregation has no authority to barter, or delegate, or 'covenant' away the Lord's deposit."*

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But in the *Wonderland* world of synodocracy, a marvelous thing happens. Here are 180 delegates. Not a one of them has any authority to lord it over other delegates, nor over fellow office-bearers who are not delegates. None of the churches to which these delegates belonged has any authority to lord it over another congregation. "How odd," as Alice (*In Wonderland*) is fond of saying, it is then that when these 180 office-bearers get together *they proceed to lord it over the entire denomination!* They hand down decrees like that of Synod '90 on women and of Synod '88 on evolution, and impose quota taxes, as if lording it over the churches were their divine right. And if you don't agree, their lordship will permit you to petition for change—and will judge your petition to suit themselves.

But that is certainly not Reformed polity.

In logic this is called the fallacy of composition: you take 180 examples of zero authority and add them together. And behold, the sum of this nothing becomes something; indeed, it becomes absolute authority! In the *Wonderland* of synodocracy, nothing comes to act as something, indeed as master.

But surely, a child could explain that an assembly made up of delegates who may not lord it over anyone else, from congregations who may not lord it over any other—such an assembly could in

*no way* (the child would say) lay "settled and binding" decrees upon anybody. Perhaps synodocrats should confront *Church Order* Article 29 with *Church Order* Article 95! And quietly put "settled and binding" in its place. For it has a place in our tradition. And if they decline, certainly it should be done in your consistory room, freeing you from the yoke of synodical tyranny. We will further specify how, next time.

#### HOW COME: "SETTLED AND BINDING"?

No Reformed synod would convert itself into just another form of Catholic autocracy.

No Reformed synod, therefore, claimed the right to lay "settled and binding" decrees upon the churches.

How, then, did this language get into the stream of the various versions of our *Church Order*?

Answer: quite simple. From ancient Rome the legal principle *stare decisis* saved time in courts of law: precedent decides. No use wasting time rehashing matters once settled unless something "new" arises.

The courts did not impose *stare decisis* upon others; they imposed it upon themselves. So did synods. Let synods save time by recalling what previous synods have once decided as the proper advice on a given issue. For this reason, delegates to the French synods were asked to study the *ACTA* of previous synods.

How, then, did "settled and binding" ever get into our *Church Order*? It once was useful, not for laying edicts upon the churches but for obliging synods to discipline themselves.

Remember that our synods began "way back" in the days when Reformed churches suffered severe persecution in France.

Might, in such times, Reformed pastors and office-bearers consult one another? Yes, as they did in Calvin's Geneva, too. And such consultations were called "colloquies"—origin of our classes.

Might colloquies consult also? Yes, and so they did, the first Reformed synod being held in Paris, 1559, ten colloquies represented.

For what purpose, then, and with what authority were these consultations?

Not, you may be sure, to duplicate Catholic autocracy in synodocracy! Our forebears met for counsel, en-



couragement, mutual benefit. No synodocracy.

Reformed colloquies and synods met at great risk. Meeting at all was invitation to arrest, imprisonment, torture, death. The stake menaced, and devoured, countless Calvinists, sometimes half a congregation called to martyrdom. Synods meeting in such circumstances had absolutely no time for repetitious talk.

And thus a decision became "settled and binding," not upon the churches but upon following synods. And that only as precedent, for synods have no authority over each other either.

Be clear about it, then. Nothing out of the synodical Vatican hangs as settled and binding over the local churches' heads.

#### 4: Another Arrow: Delegation

But the synodocrats trot out yet another little weapon: delegation.

The argument is that sending a delegate binds the sender to obedience; "you had someone there, so bow the neck!"

Such nonsense collapses when it is asked: where did our delegates get the authority to bind us in the web of synodocracy?

Congregations, as we have seen, have no authority to lord it over anyone. A congregation cannot give a delegate any authority to lord it over anybody, nor even to join in lording it over the congregation itself. Delegates do not come trailing clouds of authority to be manipulated by bureaucrats for their own ends. And of course, even if the theory were sound, 180 delegates could commit but a fraction of the churches to synodocratic autocracy.

#### 5: And A Last Arrow: "Covenant"

There is talk of late, designed to transform a *Church Order* into a "covenant," like say the pledge of a secret society. One agrees in advance to synod-think, to synod-speak, to do as synod decrees.

Bureaucracy never had it so good. Especially since the bureaucracy attempts in every way to exert a totally inexcusable influence upon the thought and judgment of elected delegates.

But this ploy stumbles over the same Reformed principle that trips all attempts to justify synodocracy. No congregation may covenant to accept authority over itself.

Let me offer a comparison: Pope John Paul II, like his predecessors, believes himself Christ's *Vicar*, that is personal representative, on earth, as direct spiritual descendent of St. Peter. It is obvious that the Pope can in no way "covenant" to give away the authority vested in his office as he understands it. What the Lord endows, only the Lord could pass on to another.

So it is in the Reformed understanding of authority in the church. The Lord endows the exercise of the authority vested in His Word upon the offices of the local congregation. The congregation has no authority to barter, or delegate, or "covenant" away the Lord's deposit.

You don't, as local church, agree in advance to be "lorded over" by anyone *because* you can't! It's a "covenant" you cannot make. If you were to try, you would simply betray the obligation laid upon you by the Lord of the church.

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In short, synodocracy is an indefensible perversion of our heritage.

And, it is just as indefensible for your congregation to bow to it.

Tossing aside the yoke will concern us next time.

Dr. De Koster is the former director of the Calvin College library and former editor of *The Banner*, weekly publication of the Christian Reformed Church.

## UNLOCKING THE MYSTERIES OF CREATION

### DATES:

May 2 and 3, 7:30 p.m.  
Sat., May 4, 9:30 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.  
and 1:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.

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