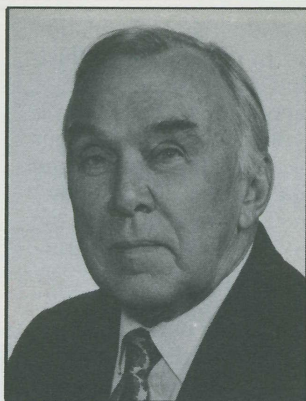


because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit to those only who, with hearty sighing, unceasingly beg them of Him and thank Him for them." That is why Isaiah says, "Give God no rest." Let the members of the church be men and women of prayer. Like Jacob of old, let them declare, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

The urgency of this exhortation is seen in the fact that there are needs, very great needs also in the life of the Christian Reformed Church. Recently I visited an elderly parishioner who has passed the fourscore and ten year mark in life. At the conclusion of our visit we joined in prayer. Since the ceasefire in the Persian Gulf War had just taken effect, I included thanks for this answer to prayer. I had barely said "Amen" when this aged saint said, "I think we must pray for repentance." She then went on to talk about the sins of the nation and the need to repent of them. As I left the retirement home that afternoon her words were echoing in my ears. Indeed, we must pray for repentance, also within the church. As we unite in giving God no rest we must acknowledge the sins which mar the image of the church and rob God of His glory.

The church must repent as we acknowledge the refusal to bow before God's Word. We must confess the unwillingness to listen to His Word and the refusal in recent years to ground all of the church's decisions in that Word. There must be repentance of the sin of ill-will, dislike and even hatred that has arisen between members of the church holding to varying positions. Our failure to "speak the truth in love" at all times must be acknowledged and confessed. In the midst of strife and dissension the church has not always been faithful to the mission given to her by the Lord. Indeed, there must be repentance.

Not only must there be repentance; there must also be supplication. How great is the need for wisdom as we struggle with the issues of the day as the spirit of the world so often exerts its influence within the church and appears more appealing than the wisdom which is from above. How sorely needed is humility of heart as we wait upon the Lord for His Word to us in the midst of the noise of controversy and the clamor of secularism. How important it is that we pray for vision to behold the challenges with which God



SYNOD-OCRACY: CAUSE AND CURE (III)

Lester De Koster

Back to fundamentals. If the Reformation was won to free the local churches from autocracy, then a rediscovery of the Reformation view of the church opens the door to freedom now.

Authority in the church, the marks of the true church, the offices of the church, the keys of the kingdom are all lodged in the local congregation. None belongs to classes, synods nor all trappings of bureaucracy built up by them. Let us be so clear about it, that synodocracy will wilt on the vine it has intruded among us.

Theologians have long discriminated the church "order" defined by Scripture from the "church order" made by the churches for immediately practical purposes. The revealed "order" was called *de jure divino*—the law of God. Calvin outlines that revealed "order" in his *Institutes*. Let us listen once again to who, by divine revelation, the churches—yours also—are:

GOD'S ORDER

In the words of Calvin:

confronts us, as people, with such a rich heritage and bountiful gifts to serve Him in a world that rests under judgment. Indeed we must give God no rest as we make intercession on behalf of the church and her synod and the delegates who will be attending the sessions of synod.

Let the church give God no rest until her mission is completed and all those whom God has chosen unto eternal life have been gathered in from the north and from the south, from the east and from the west and the day is come when the Lord Jesus Christ will come to gather His church unto Himself.

In Zechariah, chapter one, we have the portrayal of an angel who makes

1. "I shall start, then, with the church, into whose bosom God is pleased to gather His sons, not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they may be guided by her motherly care until they are mature and at last reach the goal of faith . . . so that those to whom He is Father the church may also be Mother" (Inst. IV.I.1). (Yes, Calvin endorsed the ancient concept of the church as *mater fidelium*, mother of believers, but he meant by that the local congregation not the Catholic hierarchy, nor our synodocracy. Think of the responsibility laid thus upon your congregation: "mother of believers" from birth to the Jordan.)

2. "All the elect are so united in Christ that as they are dependent upon one Head, they also grow together into one body . . . truly one since they live together in one faith, hope, and love, and in the same Spirit of God" (IV.I.2).

3. "The church universal is a multitude gathered from all nations: it is

supplication on behalf of Zion. The angel seeks mercy and compassion from God on behalf of a people in great need. The angel's prayer does not go unheeded. God responds and promises to show compassion to His people and to bless them with help and comfort. The angel prays for the church even though he has never known redemption. What an example for us who have been redeemed, that we should unite in prayer for the church as we "give God no rest."

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divided and dispersed in separate places, but agrees on the one truth of divine doctrine, and is bound by the bond of the same religion. Under it are thus included individual churches, disposed in towns and villages according to human need, so that each rightly has the name and authority of the church" (IV.I.9). (That's your congregation, too.)

4. "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists" (IV.I.9).

5. "The Lord alone should rule and reign in the church as well as have authority and pre-eminence in it, and this authority should be exercised and administered by His Word alone. He uses the ministry of men to declare openly His will to us by mouth, not by transferring to them His right and honor, but only through their mouths he may do his own work—just as a workman that uses a tool to do His work" (IV.III.1). (This is the key to the nature of authority in the church: it roots in the Word; it is never "transferred" to "the ministry of men"—they only serve the Word. Synods do not have, and can never attain, authority on their own; nor can the churches loan it to them.)

6. "For neither the light and heat of the sun, nor food and drink, are so necessary to nourish and sustain the present life as the apostolic and pastoral office is necessary to preserve the church on earth" (IV.III.2). "God often commended the dignity of the ministry by all possible marks of approval in order that it might be held among us in highest honor and esteem, even as the most excellent of all things" (IV.III.3).

7. "Governors were, I believe, elders chosen from the people. Each church, therefore, had from its beginning a senate, chosen from godly, grave and holy men, which had jurisdiction over the correcting of faults" (IV.III.8).

8. "The care of the poor was entrusted to the deacons" (IV.III.9).

That, in brief, is the Reformed profile of God's revealed "order" for the church of Jesus Christ, universal in its scope and particular in your local congregation. There, as Calvin says, "a church of God exists." That is not true of the "higher" or "broader" or "major" assemblies; the Word lends them no authority. And when you knuckle under to the bluster of "higher" or "broader" or "major" as-

semblies, you undo the Reformation and play traitor to the authority which God Himself lodges among you.

The challenge which the Lord is using synodocracy to lay upon your consistory table is simply this: you *are* the church; *can you act like it?* Don't look elsewhere for the source or the cure of our problems. Cartoon character Pogo was right, you know, "We have found the enemy, and he is us!" The failure of nerve is ours. The cure can be ours. Right here, and now.

WHO ARE WE?

1. Only the local congregation—your congregation—is truly the church, the seat of the sovereign authority exercised by the Word through those who bear office. The congregation is not the creature, not the servant, not the subordinate of any other body. Synodocracy reigns exactly to the extent that congregations do not know, or do not care, who they are, thus permitting usurpers who are *not* the church to take over control. Tyranny among those who are all equally freed in the Lord through His shed blood is no innocent matter. Nor is a congregation guiltless which so flouts its heritage as to permit synodocracy to flourish. And the Lord's displeasure in it has become evident in the anarchy He permits to grow among us in the CRC.

2. Every true church knows that it may not lord it over another church. So no true congregation sends a delegate anywhere armed with the notion of conspiring with others to lord it over other churches, nor over his own!

3. Every sincere office-bearer knows that he has no right to lord it over another office-bearer, neither those present at classes or synods, nor all those others in the churches. So no sincere office-bearer has any part in conspiring with others to lord it over his peers.

4. As Calvin makes clear, authority in the churches is vested in the Word, and only exercised by, not given to, the office-bearers. Out of this arises the Reformed principle that the churches must do what is required by the Word, and may do only what is authorized by the Word and legitimate inference from it. Therefore, they have no authority in and of themselves to delegate to classes and synods.

5. In the church, to delegate is to "send." That is all. And things being what they have become, you might want seriously to consider if a church loyal to the Reformation can

legitimately send delegates to classes and synods until synodocracy disappears.

CHANGE STARTS AT HOME

But you see, then, that change must come, not first in synodocracy but first in your congregation! Yours are the marks of the church; yours are the office-bearers of the church; yours are the keys of the kingdom; and yours is not only the right, but the obligation, to view all decrees, whether synodical, classical, bureaucratic, or sheathed in the *Church Order* as only *advisory*. You decide to take it or leave it. That, I say, is not only your option; it is, in honor of the great sacrifices made to show us freedom in obedience to Truth, your obligation.

Quite simply, if you are and wish to be a member of a church committed to orthodoxy in the Reformed tradition, unwilling to knuckle under and unwilling to flee elsewhere, stand tall in the freedom won by the Lord and re-affirmed by Geneva, and consider such things as these:

1. Receive all decrees of classes and synods for what they are, namely advisory. They come with no authority over you. They can lay no claim upon conscience; only the Word does that.

2. Dismiss in the light of the Reformed heritage we have been discussing every argument designed to give such decrees the status of authority. They have none.

3. Regain control over, so you can accept responsibility for, the use of your church's money. The quota system makes this impossible. Support as a body only what your congregation believes in and acquires strict accountability for. Let individuals support what they can in good conscience.

4. Reject the contention that delegating a representative to a broader assembly commits you to accepting its decisions. Your delegate cannot give the authority to lord it over you to anybody. He has no such authority. You cannot give it to him either. You may, or may not, as time goes along want to send a delegate at all.

5. You have no obligation to entertain classical church visitors. They are not the church. Make clear that if you want their input, you will ask for it. The same with synodical deputies wherever they appear.

6. Determine to fill your pulpit with those who, in your judgment, are qualified to apply the Word to the edification of the congregation. If ever

it was wise to pass ministerial candidates through the grill of bureaucratic, and synodical, and classical endorsement, it is so no longer.

7. Recognize the *Church Order* as merely a suggested way of being "Reformed." Shake off its use as whip, threat, as validation of "settled and binding" decrees.

8. Choose this time of crisis and chaos among us to bring the congregation face-to-face with our heritage, and its implications for us now. Ours is a noble tradition, source of liberty in church and state, towering high above and pointing far ahead of the abuse it now suffers.

In all things the Reformation standard: show from the Word!

The synodocrats sneer at this as Congregationalism?

It's only a label.

Congregationalism is, historically, Calvinism steering shy of synodocracy. That is how this form of "order" arose. Many were the Puritans who espoused it, and powerful their churches, distinguished their theologians.

But for now, names do not matter.

The reality is as outlined from Calvin. Don't name it; just act upon it.

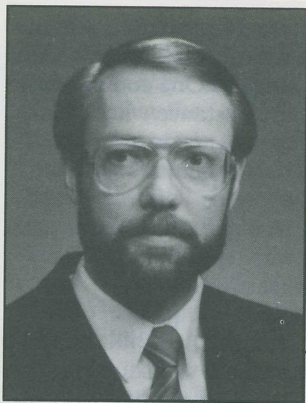
The Reformed order of church government came into the world in response to ecclesiastical tyranny. It located authority in the local congregation by way of the Word. It recognized the right of congregations and of office-bearers to consult for advice and cooperate for mutual advantage. But it rejected the hierarchical principle of rule from the top, by making the local congregation the "top" and then forbidding congregations to lord it over each other. Catholic hierarchy (and our synodocracy) was left hanging in air.

Flex the muscles the Lord provides. If enough local churches do just that, we will hear the clank of synodocracy's chains falling away from long-suffering victims across the denomination!

The need of the hour is local churches so proud of the name "church," so jealous of the authority vested in them by their Lord, so insistent that office-bearers actually *bear* the duties allowed them, that officialdom knocks at consistory doors in vain, levies taxes in vain, claims binding authority in vain.

That is what once we were.

Let's be that again.



OUR CONFESSION OF THE AUTHORITY OF GOD'S WORD

(Part Four)

Cornelis P. Venema

In my last article on the subject of our confession of the authority of God's Word, I began to outline a number of ways in which we witness today a diminishing of this confession. The burden of my argument was that, despite our profession of the final authority of the Word of God, it is easily possible for our practice to belie this confession. Here, as elsewhere, what counts is what we do with the Word, not simply what we say about it.

Specifically, I pointed out in that article three common ways in which this confession is being compromised: *first* in the "forgetfulness of the Word" which often characterizes contemporary preaching; *second*, in the tendency to ascribe greater value and authority to decisions of church assemblies or synods than to the teaching of the Word; and *third*, in the suggestion which is frequently made that the Word is "unclear." Each of these hinders the effective outworking of our confession that the Word of God has final and supreme authority. Where preaching is no longer disciplined by careful attention to what the text of the Word says, where decisions of church assemblies are valued above the teaching of God's Word, and where the Word is effectively silenced by the bold declaration that "it is not clear" — the fruits of a living confession of the authority of God's Word are not being manifested.

In what follows I would like to conclude this series by mentioning several further ways in which we are witnessing today an erosion of our commitment to the authority of the written Word of God.

A BIBLE IN THE LEFT HAND?

When I speak of a "Bible in the left hand," I have in mind any view which places another authority on a par with the Bible. This phrase has often been used to describe those cults which

have, in addition to the Scriptures, an extra-Scriptural source of authority that stands alongside of or even above the Scriptures. The Mormons, for example, while they claim to subscribe to the authority of the Word of God, compromise this claim by their commitment to the authority of *The Book of Mormon*. They have a "Bible in the left hand" which supercedes the authority of the Scriptures to regulate their faith and practice.

In my judgment Reformed believers are in danger today of falling prey to such a "Bible in the left hand" position, in which another authority comes to stand alongside of the written Word of God. Let me explain what I have in mind.

Frequently today a new view of revelation is being defended in Reformed churches which appeals to Article 2 of the *Belgic Confession*. In this Article we confess that there are two ways or "books" in which God makes Himself known to us: the "book" of creation and the Scriptures. Proponents of this new view argue that we have, therefore, two separate and parallel sources for our knowledge of God, each of which comes to us with divine authority. Just as God authoritatively reveals Himself and His will to us through the book we call the "Bible," so He authoritatively reveals Himself and His will through the book of creation.

What is especially noteworthy about this view is that its advocates tend to identify the scientific study of creation with God's revelation through the book of creation. Consequently, we should think of the scientist, even the secular one who pursues his studies without the perspective and enlightenment of the written Word of God, as a kind of "theologian." The scientist theologian studies the "knowledge of God" given to us through the creation

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