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**THE REFORMED PRESBYTERIAL  
CHURCH GOVERNMENT\***

The basic principle is: Christ is the only Head of the church, his body, and not the summum caput. This comprises three main principles.

**1. The equality of offices, ministers and churches**

This excludes all hierarchies (Luke 22:25, 26; 1 Peter 5:3). The various offices, and the ministers, are equal amongst themselves, all having the same Head.

The equality of the churches, offices and officials in the churches is the canon aureus of the Reformed church orders.

This equality excludes hierarchies, but does not remove the difference in duties. The officials, in their various offices, relate to one another just like organs in the same body, different in effect, but members of one another (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12 et seq.).

The church officers have but ministering power (ministerium) and no ruling power (magisterium) such as the power of kings or governments (1 Peter 5:3; Luke 22:25, 26).

The equality principle does not lead to independentism, but to fellowship. Each member must be subordinated to the assembly of all members in those matters that have a bearing on the unity and the mutual bond (“confoederatio”, “correspondentia” – cf. Voetius, P.E., I, V. p. 119).

On the other hand the churches do not forfeit their independence in order to become local branches of an inclusive super church (Collegialism). Each local church is an autonomous church, though not independent of other churches.

For the purpose of church government the individual church officials are thus united in church councils (1 Tim. 4:14), and the

\* Conversation with CESA regarding church government.

local churches in major assemblies of churches (Acts 15).

The church councils minister the authority of Christ in the local churches; the major assemblies minister the authority of Christ in all matters concerning common matters and unity in Christ.

The chairmanship of these meetings is conferred, according to church order, on a minister of the Word. This is based on the precedence of the Word and not on the priority of the minister. For that reason the chairmanship is terminated when the major assembly draws to an end. Therefore all decisions remain open to verification from the Holy Scriptures by each member.

## 2. The coming of age of the believers

The church is the body of Christ (Col. 1:18). This implies that the offices in the church are part of this body.

A separation of offices and congregation, so that the congregation becomes subordinated to the offices, leads to a hierarchic trend in church government. Should the church council be placed in a position of subordination with regard to the congregation, an independentistic trend comes to the fore. In both cases the sole leadership of Christ is threatened. Within the congregation the church council is the minister of the government of Christ.

Therefore the office-bearers are elected by the congregation (Acts 1:15, 23; 6:1; 14:26; 20:28; 1 Tim. 4:4 (cf. 1:18)). Indeed, they have received the anointment with the Spirit from Christ (Rom. 8:9-17 and 1 John 2:20, 27).

Christ Himself initiated the office of the apostles in the church of the New Testament, and He placed them as a foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20; 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:27, 28). No person in the church can possess a higher authority than that of the apostle. Therefore the authority of each office finds its limitation in the teachings of the apostles. (Acts. 4:24). The apostles count themselves not above the coming of age of the believers (1 Cor. 10:15). The office-bearers must therefore depend on the coming of age of the believers (1 Peter 2:9). In the fulfilment of their vocation of royal priesthood, the believers also have to fulfil instruct-

ions regarding church government. This comprises right of voting; mutual admonition (Matth. 18:15 et seq.; cf. Lev. 19:17; Hebr. 10:24; James 5:19, 20); discipline (11 Thes. 3:6 & 14; 1 Cor. 5:5). By means of the offices the believers must be prepared for this service (Eph. 4:11, 12). The authority of the office must only tie the faithful conscience to the authority of the Word which is administered by it.

### **3. The church government is ministered to by elders**

In the New Testament, churches have a variety of offices and gifts become evident. Consequently there was no vacuum in the official church government after the disappearance of the apostles. Christ “presented” the offices to the church (Eph. 4:11, 16), while the Holy Spirit “appointed” the elders in the position of the Ephesians (Acts 20:28 et. seq.). There is a close connection between “pastors and teachers” and elders. 1 Peter 5:1 and 2 also gives evidence of this when Peter himself in the same breath mentions elder, pastor and witness. Christ Himself is called “Shepherd and Bishop” in 1 Peter 2:25. And in Acts 20:28 Paul admonishes the “overseers” (“bishops”) of Ephesus to “take heed” of the church, being “sheperds”, whilst using in alternation “elder” and “overseer” (“bishop”) when talking of the same persons (Acts 20:17, 28). This interchanging of names for the same persons also appears in 1 Tim. 3:1, 2; 4:14; 5:17-19; Tit. 1:1-7. And in the first letter of Clement it is declared that the office of bishop (overseer) may not be taken from the presbyters. Overseer (bishop) indicates the task, elder (presbyter) the place in the congregation.

As “bishop” (“overseer”) and “elder” are synonyms for the same officials, the singular “overseer” cannot count as the primis inter pares of the elders, for all elders are overseers at the same time. There is no mention of hierarchic order. When, in the Pastoral Letters, “elders” continue to appear in the plural, and “overseer” in the singular, it is easily to be explained: the singular, with article, indicates genus, the overseer in general (cf. H. Ridderbos: *Pastorale Brieven*, pp. 259-261; 1 Tim. 3:1-12;

5:17; Tit. 1:7).

Paul, in 1 Tim. 3:2, starts to summarise what an overseer should (dei) be like. *Ton episkopon* (the article and the singular) does not indicate that there had been one overseer only in each congregation (cf. Phil. 1:1), but that there is talk of the genus. "Wären 'Älteste' und 'Bischöfe' nicht Bezeichnungen derselber Personen, dann müsste man notwendig entsprechende Anweisungen über die Ältesten erwarten, und zwar müssten diese in der Nähe der Anweisungen über die Bischöfe (und Diakone) stehen". (W. Michaelis: Das Ältestenamt, p. 53): When "elders" and "overseers" are indicated in the plural (Acts 14:23; Phil. 1:1; Tit. 1:5; Acts 20:17; 15:2; 21:18; 1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Peter 5:1 and 2) this points towards a corps of elders, a presbytery of church council. In 1 Tim. 4:14 this is confirmed with the presbytery. Because of this, Diotrephes, the classical example of an elder who wants "to have the preeminence among them" (3 John :9) is sharply rejected (vs. 11) as being a bad example. Take notice that John in verse 1 calls himself *presbuteros* and not *episkopos*. The elders must supervise one another (Acts 20:28). And doing this, they remain equal to one another, so that Christ alone will be First. Additional to this, the elder always is attached to a local church and he is never the overseer (*episkopos*) of various churches. The churches find their unity in Christ, their joint Head. According to the example of the apostles (Acts 15), the foundation of the church, this is recognized and experienced and preserved by joint obedience to the Word of God in an assembly of churches by means of delegates (Acts 15:2 — *etaxan*) who serve in the governing office of overseers and apostles.

The direct assignment (imperative) to an elder is "be a shepherd" (1 Peter 5:2; cf. Acts 20:28, 31). Christ will judge over the execution of this assignment (1 Peter 5:4). The assignment indicates government, care and protection. This he can do by means of the Word (Acts 20:32). And the congregation must submit themselves to this (1 Peter 5:5; cf. Hebr. 13:17).

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