

2015 REVISION
(Includes 2016 Updates)

Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government

PETER BORGDORFF



Christian
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Church

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Preface

This edition of the *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government* incorporates decisions made by the synods of the Christian Reformed Church in North America through Synod 2015. It is our hope and prayer that this manual will prove to be a helpful resource for the church as a whole, as well as for denominational functionaries who are called upon to give guidance and direction when the church gathers in its various assemblies.

For many years successive authors have served the Christian Reformed Church well by collating the decisions of the synods and formulating commentaries on its Church Order. At various times in the history of the CRC leaders like Hemkes, Heyns, Bos, Beets, Schaver, Monsma, Van Dellen, Spaan, De Ridder, Brink, Hofman, DeMoor, and Engelhard contributed their expertise in commentaries on the Church Order. This edition retains some of the contributions these leaders made as servants of the Lord and of the Christian Reformed Church. We owe them our gratitude and admiration.

We are living in a time when change is rapid and Church Order changes are increasingly frequent. Consequently, this edition, like all preceding editions, will need updating as synods make changes in the rules that govern our life together. That is the way it is when a church lives and matures. The increasing diversity of the Christian Reformed Church is likely to make further changes desirable. What is reassuring in the midst of all change is that the Lord of the Church remains constant and faithful. In that we find our peace.

Peter Borgdorff
Executive Director Emeritus
Christian Reformed Church
January 2016

Foreword:

Polity of the Christian Reformed Church

I. Reformed church polity

The Christian Reformed Church in North America, in harmony with the Word of God and the Reformed creeds, acknowledges Jesus Christ as the only head and ruler of the church. The church has adopted a Church Order so that all things in the church may be done “in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Cor. 14:40).

The general pattern of the organization provided by the Church Order is modified-presbyterian: that is, a system of leadership by elders (presbyters) who represent Christ in his church. Reformed church polity is not strictly presbyterian in all respects however (hence the designation “modified-presbyterian”). Reformed church polity differs in approach from Presbyterian church polity in that Reformed church polity, while regulative, is not confessional in nature and the Church Order does not have the same standing as the creeds.

Reformed churches do not claim that every detail of church polity is determined by the Scriptures. Only certain basic principles are found there, providing general direction to the church. Details may and do vary from one family of Reformed churches to another because expediency and specific circumstances often require varying approaches.

Church polity is not—and should not be made—a fixed, rigid system of rules. Whenever the churches would benefit from doing so, the specific application of the general principles derived from Scripture ought to be changed. In a previous version of its Church Order, the Christian Reformed Church expressed this conviction in the following way: “These Articles . . . have been so drafted and adopted by common consent, that they (if the profit of the Church demands otherwise) may and ought to be altered, augmented, or diminished.”¹ There is, as a result, an amazing amount of flexibility in procedures and practices possible within the polity of the Christian Reformed Church.

II. The origin of the Church Order

The Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church has its origin in the Calvinist Reformation in the Netherlands, where a form of government for the emerging Reformed churches of the Lowlands gradually developed in the late 1500s. Eventually, the final structure was refined and adopted by the National Synod of Dort in 1618-19. Although the Church Order of 1618-19 was widely used, it never received the official approval of the state government, which controlled the national church.

Later, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic era, a new Church Order was officially imposed on the Dutch church by King William I (1816). This new Church Order was viewed by some church leaders as part of a general drift toward liberalism and political control of the churches. Their concern included not only the polity but also the liturgy and doctrine of the church and led to the *Afscheiding* (secession movement), which split the national church in 1834. The secession

¹ *Church Order of the Christian Reformed Church* (adopted by Synod 1920), Article 86.

churches repudiated King William's Church Order and restored the original Church Order adopted by the Synod of Dort. At their Synod of Amsterdam (1840), a revision of the Church Order of Dort became the official polity of the secession churches.

The immigrants who constituted the early Dutch colonies of Western Michigan and who organized their congregations into Classis Holland and at first affiliated with the Reformed Church in America adhered to the 1840 revision. Complaints about departures from the Dort Church Order were among the grounds cited by those who seceded in 1857 from the Reformed Church in America to form what became the Christian Reformed Church. The newly founded denomination adopted the 1840 Church Order as its own in one of its earliest sessions.

Comparatively few revisions were made of this Church Order in succeeding years. The Synod of 1914 adopted a revision that incorporated the stance of Dr. Abraham Kuyper, whose American followers tended toward a kind of congregationalism. This trend toward congregationalism was not at all congenial to Kuyper's opponents, who maintained that broader assemblies of the church (classis and synod) were legitimately acting in the capacity of the church of Jesus Christ when in assembly. These tensions have never been resolved completely within the polity of the Christian Reformed Church. Each emphasis serves, however, to keep the other in balance, and consequently neither assumes the dominant role in the practice of the church.

III. The revision of 1965

The 1950 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church began a long revision process in response to an official request from the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (GKN) that the Reformed churches of the Netherlands and South Africa and the Christian Reformed Church cooperate in producing an international, uniform Church Order. Although this international attempt soon proved unrealistic, it did focus the attention of the church on matters of church polity and create a new impetus for change.

Contemporary society was undergoing rapid change. This, together with the exposure to the world at large of many church members who served in the armed forces overseas and the significant adjustments demanded by the vast number of Dutch immigrants to Canada and the United States after World War II, suggested the need for a review of the polity of the church. In order to respond to the changes in society and the place of the church's witness to the world, the church began to reflect seriously on the nature of its Church Order. A vital part of the Reformed heritage is found in the principle that the polity of the church ought to be responsive to the times in which the church serves its generation.

In 1965 a Revised Church Order was adopted, retaining by specific direction of preceding synods the basic format of the Church Order of Dort. The Revised Church Order of 1965 demonstrates that the church is awake to its responsibilities in the contemporary world and is desirous of responding to that world in obedience to her Lord.

IV. Recent trends reflected in the Church Order

Observant students of the Church Order's development will note that a number of trends within the church in recent years are increasingly reflected in the manner in which the Christian Reformed Church deals with its Church Order.

A. Revisions

A surprising number of revisions of the Church Order have been made since its adoption in 1965. Between the years 1912 and 1965 only two significant changes were made in the Church Order. From 1965 to 2015 more than sixty articles have been revised, some more than once. This trend continues unabated. Almost an equal number of requests for revision of other articles were rejected by the synods during the same periods. The intent and/or application of other articles have been clarified as needed or requested.

B. The office of every believer

There is a growing interest in the subject of individual church members' responsibility in and for the ministry of the whole church. That interest flows, in part at least, from the Reformed principle that emphasizes the "priesthood of all believers." Although the structure of the Church Order has historically been oriented toward official functions performed by ordained office holders and ecclesiastical assemblies, some recent modifications have been in the direction of the responsibilities of the believers (see, for example, Art. 74-c and Art. 79-b).

C. The nature of office in the church

There has also been growing interest expressed for a clearer definition of the nature of office in the church. The report on "Ecclesiastical Office and Ordination" (Report 44, *Acts of Synod 1973*) established and defined basic biblical principles and continues to make contributions to the church's understanding of office and ordination.

While the function of elders and pastors is fairly well established in the life of the church, the place of the diaconate in the church's structure has received more specific attention in recent years. This development is wholesome and has stimulated serious efforts to give the diaconal office its proper place in the ministries of the local church and in the church's ministry to the community and the world. The opening of the office of deacon to all confessing members of the church by Synods 1978 and 1984 made for a significant change with respect to the diaconal office. Another step forward came when Synod 1997 permitted classes to allow the delegation of deacons to classis meetings (see Church Order Art. 40 and its Supplement). Further, Synod 2015 approved the delegation of deacons to synod (see Church Order Art. 45).

Synod 1978 established the position of evangelist. Rather than creating a fourth office at that time synod decided that an evangelist would function as part of the office of elder. In 2003 the position was renamed *ministry associate*. Synod 2012 renamed and expanded the position into a fourth office: *commissioned pastor*. Synod increasingly recognized that there are circumstances in which specific authorization needs to be given to selected and qualified persons to perform functions previously performed only by ministers of the Word. This fourth office derives its function from Article 23 in the Church Order.

D. Synodical study committees

Synodical study committees continue to serve the church with significant biblical and theological research. It is a joyful experience to note that biblical data and norms continue to govern these studies and the conclusions of the committees. The impact of these reports cannot be measured simply by synodical

approval or action. Sometimes a number of years pass before the conclusions of these studies are translated into action.

In this volume, reference will be made under specific Church Order articles to appropriate studies on related subjects. We cannot afford to ignore the work that has been done before us and upon which we are challenged to build today.

E. *Healthy tensions*

Within Reformed church polity we continue to see healthy tensions between the rights and prerogatives of the local congregation and the authority of the broader assemblies (i.e., classes and synod). One side of the tension comes from those who desire greater uniformity among the churches in order to retain, or even enhance, denominational cohesiveness. The other side of the tension comes from those who prefer the church's polity to be flexible enough to maintain the liberty of the local church while holding to a common, basic, confessional commitment in our denominational relationships. To maintain balance between these two perspectives is not easy. It is likely that this tension will remain a factor in the life of the Christian Reformed Church for some time to come, but it is desirable that the tension not overtake the value of doing what is best for the welfare of the whole church.

F. *North American environment*

Any comparative review of Christian Reformed Church government with its European antecedents demonstrates how clearly the church has become a part of its North American environment. As a denomination, the Christian Reformed Church in North America maintains ties with Reformed churches throughout the world and is affected by theological movements and developments among them. The CRC shares many concerns with other churches of the Reformed family, but many of these concerns are based less on our common roots than on the character of our age. There are other concerns that arise from our peculiar situation in Canada and the United States. The very failure of the 1950 attempt to produce an internationally uniform Church Order for Reformed churches evidenced wholesome changes within each denomination as each responded to its specific environment. It is to be hoped that in the future we shall likewise profit from our associations with churches both within and beyond our own traditions as well as from national and emerging churches with which we cooperate in mission and benevolent ministries.

More recently the denomination is coming to grips with the need to modify certain articles of the Church Order in order to provide for the special circumstances of members and churches of multicultural and multiracial groups. The modification of certain Church Order articles approved by synod for the Native American communities comprising Classis Red Mesa is one example. Another example is synod's consideration of theological education requirements for ethnically diverse ministerial candidates. Still another example is the concern for incorporating various ethnic churches into what was, until a few decades ago, a mostly homogeneous denomination. What is so encouraging and hopeful in all this change is that the basic principles remain while their application becomes more varied. The real test will come, however, in how well the church as a whole practices what is desirable and clear in theory and whether a way is found to give a place to everyone as members in Christ's church.

V. Using the Church Order and this manual

This *Manual of Christian Reformed Church Government* is not intended as an exhaustive resource book to be consulted when one wants to know whether synod said something about a matter or what it has decided on a particular subject. Nor is its purpose to settle arguments over fine points raised in council rooms. To use it in this way would defeat the purpose both of this volume and of the Church Order itself. The intention of this manual is to provide information and perspective on the basic principles that governed decisions of the past and that are regulative for the future. Synods are fallible, and their decisions at times have been imprecise. Nevertheless, we believe that God's Spirit leads and guides into truth.

This volume collates and interprets synodical decisions, reports, and advice. In one sense the material contained in this manual is prescriptive, since the Christian Reformed Church, by means of its Church Order, "regulates its ecclesiastical organization and activities" (Church Order Art. 1). In another sense this material is descriptive of where the Christian Reformed Church finds itself at this particular moment of its existence. The book has been written and compiled with the conscious realization that a project such as this is always dated. Subsequent decisions to this edition will be forthcoming and, therefore, updated editions will be made available periodically.

The task of compilation demands that judgments be made about what to include and what to exclude. The criteria employed were the welfare of the church today and guidance for the church in the future. When reviewing the multitude of regulations, decisions, and advice that synods have adopted through the years, it becomes clear that some synodical decisions are too dated to be included. The purpose of this manual is to provide information that is pertinent as the church ministers in a contemporary context. For the most part, decisions and references that go back more than twenty-five years are not included in this manual.

INTRODUCTION TO THE CHURCH ORDER

Article 1: The Purpose and Basis of the Church Order

- a. The Christian Reformed Church, confessing its complete subjection to the Word of God and the Reformed creeds as a true interpretation of this Word, acknowledging Christ as the only head of his church, and desiring to honor the apostolic injunction that officebearers are “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Eph. 4:12), and to do so “in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Cor. 14:40), regulates its ecclesiastical organization and activities in the following articles.
- b. The main subjects treated in this Church Order are The Offices of the Church, The Assemblies of the Church, The Task and Activities of the Church, and The Admonition and Discipline of the Church.

Commentary

Article 1 of the Church Order provides the rationale, as well as a statement of purpose, for the role and use of the Church Order. The general nature of this article requires that it be interpreted within the context of the following considerations.

I. Principles of Reformed church polity

There are three basic principles imbedded in Reformed church polity:

- a. Complete submission to the Word of God and the Reformed Creeds
The Church Order is subordinate to the Word of God and to the Reformed creeds insofar as either addresses a Church Order matter. To the degree that biblical teaching can be applied to a Church Order issue, the Holy Scriptures are the final court of appeal in matters of church government and practice.
Even a casual reading of the Church Order shows a frequency of references to “the Word.” Pastors are called “minister[s] of the Word” (Art. 2); the preaching of the Word is an essential element in public worship services (Arts. 51, 54); synod approves the Bible versions used in worship (Art. 47); church societies have as their purpose “the study of God’s Word” (Art. 72).
Only five references are made to specific Scripture passages, however:
 - 1) Article 1 refers to Ephesians 4:12 and 1 Corinthians 14:40, stating the principle of preparing “God’s people for works of service, that the body of Christ may be built up” and doing so “in a fitting and orderly way.”

- 2) Article 73 refers to the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20 and parallels are implied) to which the churches must be obedient.
- 3) Article 79 references 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 pertaining to participation in the Lord's Supper.
- 4) Article 80 establishes procedures in matters of discipline on the basis of Matthew 18:15-17.

The creeds must also be taken seriously since Article 29 of the Church Order states that the decisions of the assemblies shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order itself.

The Christian Reformed Church subscribes to the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort. These three Reformed confessions form the confessional basis referenced in Article 1. In addition, the Christian Reformed Church subscribes to three ecumenical creeds: the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.

- b. Acknowledgment that Christ is the only head of his church

The Bible speaks of the church as the body of Christ and of Christ as its head. He is the Lord of the Christian Church in all of its various denominational and congregational expressions. As the church's true and only head he has complete authority over its life and ministry (Belgic Confession, Art. 31). The ministry of the church is Christ's ministry, and as Christ's ministry it functions with the power and authority of Christ. Because Christ alone is Lord of the church no one may presume to rule in his place. Those who serve and exercise authority in the church must do so in Christ's name and according to his Word.

- c. The desire that "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way"

The third principle of Reformed church polity is the apostolic injunction that "... everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way" (1 Cor. 14:40). Synod at various times has adopted principles and made decisions that approved specific organizational structures to assure that good order result at the local, classical, and synodical expressions of the church.

The Belgic Confession, Article 30, expresses the same sentiment where it is stated that everything will be done well and in good order in the church when persons are elected who are faithful and possess the spiritual qualifications such as the Apostle Paul articulated in his instructions to Timothy.

2. Relationship of Scripture, the Reformed confessions, and the Church Order

It is important to be clear about the relationship that pertains to the authority of the Holy Scriptures, the Reformed confessions, and the Church Order. As stated above, the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God are first in priority and authority to the extent that the Bible addresses polity issues. The Reformed confessions are accepted as a true interpretation of this Word. The confessions are themselves subject to the Word. The Belgic Confession states (Art. 7):

Therefore we must not consider human writings—no matter how holy their authors may have been—equal to the divine writings; nor may we put custom, nor the majority, nor age, nor the passage of times or persons, nor councils, decrees, or official decisions above the truth of God, for truth is above everything else.

From time to time synod has accepted new translations, and approved minor revisions, of the confessions to which the Christian Reformed Church subscribes. At various times synod has revised translations of the confessions (e.g., 1972, 1985, and 2006), but their essential character has been preserved and their teachings about the nature and functioning of the church remain as historically understood. In 1975 synod adopted the following with reference to the status of synodical decisions that deal with confessional content:

- a. The Reformed confessions are subordinate to the Scripture and are accepted “as a true interpretation of this Word” (Church Order Art. 1-a). These confessions are binding upon all the officebearers as indicated by their subscription to these confessions in the Covenant for Officebearers. These confessions are presumed to be accepted by all confessing members of the church as is indicated by their public profession of faith.
- b. Synodical pronouncements on doctrinal and ethical matters are subordinate to the confessions, and they shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved that they conflict with the Word of God or the Church Order (Church Order Art. 29). All officebearers and members are expected to abide by these synodical deliverances (*Acts of Synod 1975*, p. 44).

The Church Order then is subordinate to both the Holy Scriptures and the Reformed confessions. It contains statements of principles derived from both sources as well as many regulations that reflect the contemporary situation of the church at the time such regulations were adopted. Reformed church polity has always maintained that the Church Order ought to be changed when the experience of the church requires a revision. If the Church Order is to serve its intended purpose then revision must be an ongoing process.

3. Divisions of the Church Order

The main subjects treated in the Church Order, in addition to the Introduction (Art. 1) and the Conclusion (Arts. 85-86), are as follows:

- a. The Offices of the Church (Arts. 2-25)
- b. The Assemblies of the Church (Arts. 26-50)
- c. The Task and Activities of the Church (Arts. 51-77)
- d. The Admonition and Discipline of the Church (Arts. 78-84)

Each of these deals with some aspect of the organizational structure and function of the church. The Church Order is concerned with the question of how the principles of the Word and the contemporary life of the church affect the way the church carries out its mission.

The Church Order’s scope is therefore limited. It touches on the life of the individual member only occasionally and marginally. Even then it does

this in terms of his or her relationship to the structured church. Many details of procedure and practice are omitted, giving each local church great liberty to structure its life and service in harmony with the general principles of Reformed polity. The very brevity of the Church Order confirms this feature.

4. Church Order supplements

Church Order supplements are synodical regulations pertaining to the implementation of the Church Order articles and are included with the Church Order by the decision of specific synods.

I. THE OFFICES OF THE CHURCH

A. General Provisions

Article 2: The Special Offices in the Church

The church recognizes the offices of minister of the Word, elder, deacon, and commissioned pastor. These offices differ from each other only in mandate and task, not in dignity and honor.

Commentary

I. General observations

This article deals with the special offices of the church. It is important to note the concept of offices in the Holy Scriptures and the Reformed confessions.

- a. The word *office* as we understand it in the church is neither an accurate translation of any Old Testament Hebrew word nor of any New Testament Greek word. As a general term for what we call an “office” (namely, a certain type of service within the church) the word *diakonia* (which means “ministry” or “service”) is generally used in the New Testament. We therefore follow the biblical pattern more closely when we designate the functions performed in and by the church and its members as ministries (services) rather than offices.
- b. This article calls attention to the “special” offices in the church as distinguished from the “general” office known as the priesthood of all believers. The Heidelberg Catechism describes the ministry or office of all believers in Lord’s Day 12, Question and Answer 32:

Q. But why are you called a Christian?

- A. Because by faith I am a member of Christ and so I share in his anointing. I am anointed to confess his name, to present myself to him as a living sacrifice of thanks, to strive with a free conscience against sin and the devil in this life, and afterward to reign with Christ over all creation for eternity.
- c. In Ephesians 4 the apostle Paul indicates the close relationship between some of the special offices in the church and the office of all members of Christ’s body. While urging every Christian “to live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (v. 1), he notes the intricate relationship between all offices in the church when he writes, “It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (vv. 11-12).

The special offices and the general office of all believers are blended together so that “speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow

up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (vv. 15-16).

- d. Those who wish to make a more complete study of the offices of the church should consult Report 44, "Ecclesiastical Office and Ordination" in the *Acts of Synod 1973* (pp. 635-716); Report 31, "Authority and Function of Elders and Deacons," in *Agenda for Synod 1987* (pp. 385-421); the report on "Ordination and 'Official Acts of Ministry'" in *Agenda for Synod 1999* (particularly pp. 284-89); and the report on "Ordination and 'Official Acts of Ministry'" in *Agenda for Synod 2001* (esp. pp. 269-91). These comprehensive reports present both an in-depth biblical study on office and ordination and an account of the historical development of the concepts of office and ordination.

2. The special offices of the church

The Church Order of Dort (1618-19) mentions four special offices: minister of the Word, professor of theology, elder, and deacon. These offices were recognized in our own early church orders until 1965, when only three offices were listed, the office of professor of theology no longer being recognized as distinct from that of minister of the Word. A fourth office, that of commissioned pastor (formerly called *ministry associate*, and even before that *evangelist*), was added in 1978. The Church Order specifies that these offices do not differ in "dignity and honor" but only in "mandate and task." The equality of offices is an important value in the polity of the CRC; while in practice there may be a tendency to elevate one office over another, such elevation is not supported by the Church Order.