

Belgic Confession 30 – Innovations in Church Government?

Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ: Under the past government Canada was safer, richer – the richest in the world, and we had lower taxes than before. But Canadians chose another leader.

Under the past leader we fought for heavier punishment for crimes, the present leader has legalized marijuana for recreational use and has undone some harsher sentences for criminals. The former leader opposed homosexual marriages, the new one embraces it.

You see, Canadians wanted change. Our government changes with the desires of Canadians. We call it democracy.

Can we have democracy in the church and change leadership when we desire? After all, some Christians want women elders and ministers. Some prefer casual worship. But how is the church to be run? As a democracy? You will hear from God about this today.

Our headings are:

Christ sets the rules

Christ sets the rulers

Christ sets the reasons

Our goals are: **That you will grasp the blessings of godly leadership in the church and that you will work to support that godly leadership.**

God Sets Rules

We believe that this true **Church must be governed by that spiritual polity which our Lord has taught us in His Word;**

1. The first congregations were organized by command before the fall.

Adam and Eve were told to have dominion over the earth and they had to work together for that to happen.

After the Fall God continued to regulate worship. Remember how **Cain was rejected and Abel accepted. God said: “If you do well...”** This meant Cain knew well...he knew what God required...but he didn't do it. **God called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees** and he worshipped as God required. Remember how he did not kill his son. He incorporated in a formal way all those who were of his household into a church through circumcision.

2. Does God have the right to determine how people worship?

a. Yes. He is the Creator. He must be worshipped. But there is another reason as well.

b. Yes, he is the Re-creator. Jesus was the ground by which men were brought into the church in the OT and NT. He was slain before the foundation of the world. Since you belong to him, he has the right to demand worship and how you are to worship him.

Acts 20:28 "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, **among**

which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

3. Some don't like this and argue pragmatically that the church must loosen-up some of God's laws or it will die.

For example, they argue that because women are as educated as men, they should be included in the leadership. To them, God's teaching on these matters is irrelevant. But the church is his. You must therefore run it the way he says. (Won't it be nice if civil leaders understand that they are under the rule of God and obey him?)

The church must never be run in the "way you think is best." **God sets the goals and the means to those goals.** Bouwman: The Church is **not** "...a democracy where the people rule. The Church is **not** a social organization either where the highest social rank rules. It is **not** an aristocracy where the aristocrats rule. Rather, the Church is a **Christocracy** where the Christ rules." It matters not if you like your elders or not. Does Christ love them?

God Sets the Rulers

namely, that there must be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; also **elders and deacons**, who, together with the **pastors**, form the council of the Church;

1. So how is Christ's church to be run?

God has appointed ministers, elders, and deacons to run the church. All other offices were temporary. (There are no prophets, etc. anymore.) Let's look at the details of each.

2. The minister is an elder who is equipped by God to preach, pray, and counsel.

a. His focus is usually on preaching. Usually he has more education. In Reformed churches ministers are usually required to have at least a Master of Divinity degree and face a number of examinations in seminary, in the local church, and from the Classis (elders and ministers from neighboring churches) in the areas of knowledge, personal life, and the ability to preach. This is to protect truth. (One of the weaknesses of the modern church is directly linked to the **student missionary movement of the 19th century.**)

b. If a candidate is found to meet those qualifications and is called by a congregation to serve, he is ordained to that ministry.

c. Ministers are the ones the Apostle Paul said are worthy of double honor, meaning honor and honorarium.

3. Elders are equipped by God to be spiritual overseers of the church.

They teach by word and sacrament, pray for, and counsel God's people.

a. The Apostles commanded the ordination of Elders. They were **not self-appointed.**

Titus 1:5 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should **set in order the things** that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded...

The term to “appoint” meant to set in place that which was nominated or elected.

b. There was always a plurality of elders to prevent dictators. And when they had difficulties greater than their local abilities, they asked other elders for help. Acts 15.

c. The term “elder” implies the work of “pastor” or shepherd. “Pastor” comes from “pasture,” or the one who takes care of sheep... This was caring title.

Acts 20:17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and **called for the elders of the church.** 28 "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to **shepherd the church of God** which He purchased with His own blood.

d. The term “**presbyters**” was the Greek word for “elder.” This is why we have a Presbyterian system of government.

e. The term “**bishop**” (episcopos) was the proper or official title of the pastor.

f. The term “**overseers**” is a verb describing the official work of pastor. It is the same word as bishop.

g. In some churches, like many Pentecostals (like Roman Catholic churches) they made up a hierarchy. There are elders, who are under Pastors, who are under Overseers, who are under Bishops. This is biblically indefensible. This allows dictatorships. Any argument supporting their view is based on tradition, not Bible.

4. Deacons are equipped by God to care for the non-spiritual matters of the church.

a. The Apostles commanded the ordination of deacons.

b. The church was rapidly expanding – and it was a great blessing to the church. But the elders **couldn’t do everything.** Apostles found themselves extremely busy with teaching and prayer. And the needy were ignored. So under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit they asked for men to assist them so they could focus on their work.

Acts 6:2 - Then the twelve summoned the multitude of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables. 3 "Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you **seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom,** whom **we may appoint** over this business;

Where would they meet? What records did they need? What are the latest charges from the Jews and Romans? How do we keep money and gifts? What do feed the hungry... who cooks...who gets help...who really needed help? The elder **knew the curses that came on** God’s people who ignored the **widows, orphans, and foreigners.** Deacons helped to fulfill this need. They knew that God urged **generosity, mercy, and hospitality** (Psalm 68:5):

James 1:27 - Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

5. What about women deacons?

There were women deacons mentioned in the Bible. Who were deaconesses? The word translated “servant” (diaconos) here is the same word used for deacons. Deaconesses were female deacons.

But this word is used in a general sense, not in the special sense of office. Example: An elder is an older person (general sense), and an elder is a church officer (special sense.) So the Phebe (a deaconess) was not ordained to the church to be a deacon as an office, but was a servant of God’s people –godly for sure.

If a woman were a deacon (officer in the special sense), it means that she would have authority over her husband. The Scriptures clearly forbid this. Also, the qualification for deacon is the ability **to rule one’s house well also**. So a woman is exempted.

God Sets the Reasons

that by these means the true religion may be preserved, and the true **doctrine everywhere propagated**, likewise **transgressors chastened** and restrained by spiritual means; also that the poor and **distressed may be relieved and comforted**, according to their necessities. By these means everything will be carried on in the Church with **good order and decency**, when faithful men are chosen, according to the rule prescribed by St. Paul in his Epistle to Timothy.

1. God set leaders in their different functions as a means of preserving his church and so preserve his glory-his cause.

This means that anyone who **diverges from God’s ordained way is robbing him of the glory that belongs to him**. It doesn’t matter if you like one way more than the other, or if you think the church should change based on the changes in the world, or if you will attract more people. **God wants his glory and will defy you if you try to steal it by changing his ordained order.**

2. To preserve his church God requires that these leaders ensure that true doctrine is propagated.

This is why there is a plurality of elders – so they can make sure truth is being proclaimed. There is no arbitrary pope-like figure.

2Timothy 4:2 – Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, exhort...

3. To preserve his church God requires these leaders ensure that godly discipline, discipline that restrains the wicked, be practiced.

You don’t discipline your neighbor’s children. Church discipline is only done for those who

are members of God's family.

Matthew 18:15-18 - "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. "But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' "And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

It is useless to teach doctrines without discipline.

4. To preserve his church God required that these leaders ensure that those who were distressed were comforted.

And the church of God can endure many trying times – real personal struggles. Real church leaders then go to work, comforting through counsel, support, and prayer.

Judgment is associated with lack of comforting the distressed.

5. To preserve his church God required that leaders ensure that there be mutual support of each other among the members of the church.

Acts 2:44-45 - Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

God has done so much for you. The more you have the more is expected. It is evidence of true religion...remember from above. (James 1:27 above)

1Corinthians 13:1 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, **but have not love,** I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.

6. To preserve his church God required that these leaders ensured good order and decency in the church.

Conclusion:

Christ owns the church. He purchased her with his own blood. He then determines how she should live. But his rules are not harsh and they are not for punishment. His rules bring blessings. Those who reject God's rules and rulers are therefore robbing themselves of his blessing and robbing him of the glory that belongs to him.

Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ:

1. Make the life of your leaders easy. Pray for them. Submit to them. Help them. How? Call a sister to find out how she is doing, by inviting others to worship, and by supporting the Lord's work by your presence and gifts!

2. If you don't support your leaders, you are robbing them and you of God's necessary blessings, and you are robbing God of the glory that belongs to him.

3. Consider why you might serve in the Lord's church! You belong to him, body and soul. He owned you when he died on the cross.

Finally: Being outside of the church will surely lead to an eternity in hell. May God move your heart to surrender to him and may you plead for Christ's work to be counted as yours so that you can become part of God's family –even to enjoy godly rule!