

The authority of major assembly and consistory (1)

By: M.R. Vermeer

In Reformed churches major assemblies (classis and synod) are convened regularly. Now, the question may arise: what is the authority of a major assembly? And in connection with this: what is the distinction with the authority of a consistory?

A correct, Scriptural answer to these questions is not merely a theoretical exercise, but necessary to remain truly reformed. In the history of the churches, we often see that spiritual decay goes together with deterioration in church polity. The modernism of 1834 went together with a code of regulations (Dutch: 'reglementenbundel') as a church orderly means of coercion. The 'presumptive regeneration' of 1944 was imposed by synodical hierarchy. An "erroneous path", also an erroneous *ecclesiastical* path, can be implemented though synodical or classical "arrogance and pride" (Prov. 8:13) . Thus, it is still of importance!

The authority of a major assembly

The authority of a major assembly is summarized by Rev. Joh. Jansen[1] as follows:

- Not original, but derived (through delegation from the consistories);
- Not general, but limited (only regarding ecclesiastical matters which could not be finished in the minor assemblies);
- Not higher, but less (a delegate has less authority than the delegating body);
- Not compelling, but ministering (a major assembly cannot force a minor assembly to execute the decisions);
- Not ongoing, but temporary (only for as long as the major assembly convenes);
- Not infallible, but conditional and subordinate (to God's Word).

In the church order these aspects clearly come forward, especially in art. 30 ('no other than ecclesiastical matters and that in an ecclesiastical manner'), art. 32 ('delegates') and art. 74 ('no church shall in any way lord it over other churches').

Derived authority

The authority of the major assembly is thus a *derived* authority; from this it follows that the major assemblies may not rule over the churches unless the churches would transfer this right (of ruling) to the major assemblies. In art. 74 C.O., however, the churches have agreed together *not* to do this: "*No church shall in any way lord it over other churches*".

Consequently, art. 74 C.O. is of fundamental importance for the cooperation in a church federation, as noted by Prof. S. Greijdanus around the time of the Liberation of 1944:

"The one church may be larger than the other, richer in excellent persons and gifts, but that does not give her any right to lord, or power to rule, over another. And what applies to the one church in this respect, also applies to the other, and all others, and therefore to all of them together. 10 x 0 and 20 x 0 is just as much 0 as 1 x 0. Whenever the one church does not have any say over another, and this is true of all of them, then neither do these churches have any say of authority over another church when they come together in a classis meeting or synod." [2]

Thus, all synodical and classical hierarchy is rejected with this article!

Delegation

The major assemblies have a derived authority because they come into existence through delegation from the churches. The classes and synods are thereby, strictly speaking, not a gathering of churches, but of *delegates* from churches. The major assembly can only be called 'churches' in a metaphorical manner, because in her the churches are represented by delegates.

Neither are these major assemblies meetings of office bearers. A good rule is that ministers and elders are sent as delegates, a rule that is also established in the

church order (art. 44 C.O.). Yet, these office bearers are present at a classis or synod by virtue of delegation and not by virtue of their office. The delegates are, of course, accountable as office bearers for their decisions and dealings at the major assemblies.

Derived ecclesiastical authority

Major assemblies therefore have no authority as an office bearer over the churches, but a derived ecclesiastical authority, as Prof. Greijdanus noted:

“From this it follows, that classical and synodical meetings are not the same as consistory meetings. There is a difference in essence or kind between consistories on the one side, and classes and synods on the other side. They are different in nature. In consistory meetings the several consistory members are present due to their office. They belong to those consistories by virtue of their office, and according to their office they are members of their consistories, and they have to speak and act in their consistories according, or by virtue of, their office. Their deeds are office bearer’s acts, with an ‘official authority’. At classis meetings or synods, however, the members are by virtue of delegation. (...) Their deeds at a classis meeting or synod are not ‘office bearers acts’, with ‘official’ authority. They act as representatives of their churches or major assemblies, and insofar with the authority of their churches. But an ecclesiastical authority is not a Divine authority. At regional synods the ecclesiastical cord is, so to speak, further stretched out, and at general synods even more so.”[3]

Hereby prof. Greijdanus made the following call to synod delegates (which of course also applies to delegates to classis):

“This should not be forgotten by synod delegates. They should even more meticulously give heed to the life and well-being of the churches, not to follow and push through one’s own will and desire, but to realize that they are present by virtue of a cascaded delegation and not by virtue of their being an office-bearer, as by own authority. Synodical arrogance, which acts with rebuke and reprimand towards churches which request information or bring forward considerations has no place here. Synods have no original, own authority which is independent from, and superior to the churches; but only a

derived, delegated jurisdiction. The original authority in this has been given to the churches.”[4]

Hierarchical spirit

A hierarchical spirit can manifest itself in several manners in church life, a few examples are:

- A classis or synod has planned ‘continuing sessions’ with an expanding agenda. Such a classis or synod behaves as if it were a consistory meeting with its own independent authority
- A delegate at classis or synod proposes to deal with a matter which has not come from the churches to be put on the agenda. Such a delegate acts as if he has a general ‘official authority’ at the major assembly.
- A major assembly which operates in a local church with difficulties ‘to set matters straight’, against the will of consistory. Such a course of action is lording over another church.

A hierarchical spirit can also be present in a more hidden way, for example through committee members, deputies or advisers claiming a prominent role in church life. The danger here is that ‘self-continuation’ of major assemblies enters through the back door. It also does not encourage delegates at classis or synod to thoroughly study the items on the agenda themselves.

In a following article, the authority of a consistory in distinction from a major assembly will be discussed.

[1] Joh. Jansen, *Korte Verklaring van de Kerkenordening* (Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1976 (reprint 1st ed. 1923)), pp. 165-166.

[2] S. Greijdanus, *Over gereformeerd kerkrecht* (Kampen: [s.n.], 1943), p. 1. The booklet ‘Over gereformeerd kerkrecht’ (English: ‘About Reformed Church Polity’) was intended by Greijdanus to function as the last chapter of a manuscript called ‘Church Political Studies’; this manuscript, however, has not been published and has been added to the archive of Greijdanus no sooner than 1997 [see D. Deddens, ‘Het manuscript ‘Kerkrechtelijke studiën’. Greijdanus over

gereformeerd kerkrecht', in: G. Harinck et al., *Leven en werk van prof. dr. Seakle Greijdanus* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 1998), p. 233]. This booklet thus provides the more or less 'conclusive' thoughts of Greijdanus regarding church polity.

[3] Greijdanus, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

[4] *Ibid.*