

The authority of major assembly and consistory (2, final)

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In the previous article the authority of a major assembly was discussed. In this article we will take a closer look at the question: what distinguishes the authority of a consistory?

Article 37 C.O.

To understand this distinction, it is good to take a closer look at article 37 C.O. (Book of Praise, 1984). During the Liberation of 1944 the Synodicals argued that the 'liberated' people undermined the authority of major assemblies with "sophistic arguments", by merely citing article 74 C.O. ('no lording') and neglecting article 37 C.O.![1]

First of all, however, it should be noted that in an older edition the Church Order (in the Netherlands prior to 1978) article 37 read:

"The classis has the same *right of say* over the consistory as the regional synod has over the classis, and the general synod over the regional synod."[2]

Thus, this article does not begin with the authority of a consistory over the congregation, and does not subsequently 'ascend' up to and including the authority of a synod! This article instead 'merely' states that the major assembly has authority. A consistory meeting is different from a classis or synod meeting, as prof. Greijdanus noted:

"A consistory consists of office-bearers, who receive their office, task, duty, and how they must carry that out, directly from God, although they were elected by the congregation. They receive their mandate, their charge, their task description, their work description not from men, but from God in His Word. Therefore, a consistory meeting is a meeting of men with an own Divine charge, of men which assemble, act and decide according to their personal

duty of their office. Their acts are ‘official’ acts.”[3]

Here is a clear distinction from the authority of a major assembly, which has a derived authority!

Jurisdiction

Secondly, it should be noted that this article does not say that the major assembly has a general authority, but that it has *a certain ‘right of say’*. Prof. P. Deddens (1891-1958) pointed out that it is remarkable that the Church Order uses the words ‘right of say’, and not the word ‘authority’.[4] The word ‘authority’ alludes to the idea of ‘power’, while ‘right of say’ brings us in the sphere of the *law*: to make a judicial decision. The current edition of the Church Order thus speaks about “the same jurisdiction”. The major assemblies have the (derived, ecclesiastical) authority, the competence, “*to give a lawful verdict*”.

The meaning of this article is underlined by the history behind it. At the synod of Middelburg 1581 the question was brought forward whether large churches, as well as small ones, had to be subject to decisions of classes and synods. Likewise, churches or minor assemblies sometimes made decisions while neglecting decisions by major assemblies. It was against *this* practice that synod came with a statement which was similar to the current article 37.

Article 37 thus reinforces the first part of article 31 C.O.: “whatever may be agreed upon, by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding”. This article warns against independentism, or as prof. Deddens said:

“[against] an unmotivated withdrawal from the obligations of the federative bond, an unmotivated going against the promise of art. 31, the agreement to consider for settled and binding decisions to which the condition of art. 31 does not apply.

Article 37 reminds us of this promise. This reminder was necessary. If large churches deemed themselves too large to listen to synod’s decisions, if minor assemblies make decisions contrary to what a major assembly decided, without bringing grounded objections against these decisions, then the churches have to warn for this. (emphasis in original)”[5]

This reinforces the first part of art. 31 C.O. – but then in such a manner that the

second part of art. 31 C.O. is fully maintained: “unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order”.

The authority of a consistory

The authority of a consistory is thus clearly different from the authority of a major assembly. Rev. Joh. Jansen[6] summarized this distinction as follows:

- As to origin (a consistory has its authority given directly by Christ, while a major assembly has a derived authority);
- As to necessity (a consistory is necessary for the being of an instituted church, a major assembly is not);
- As to essence (a consistory has original and essential authority, a major assembly has derived and ‘accidental’ authority);
- As to duration (a consistory is continually responsible for the government of the church, a major assembly gathers at a certain moment);
- As to purpose (a consistory has an independent existence, a major assembly exists for the sake of particular churches).

Consequences

This reformed doctrine of church government has, as all sound doctrine, consequences for reformed life. The distinction between the authority of a major assembly and a consistory implies that a major assembly may not intrude in the life of a particular church to do ‘what belongs to the consistory’ - it is up to the *office-bearers* to spiritually govern the congregation, by the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments and the exercise of discipline (see art. 30 Belgic Confession).

A major assembly thus cannot execute a decision in a particular church itself, but gives her decisions as a ‘binding advice’, which has to be executed by the consistory (apart from the condition in art. 31 C.O.).

This church polity also has consequences for the dealings of a major assembly when there are difficulties in a particular church. It is a violation of the church of the Lord if a major assembly would intervene unauthorized and would press its own insights:

“And therefore, the classical and synodical assemblies stand under the consistory meetings, and those classis and synod assemblies have a task and duty only insofar the ‘mutuus consensus’, i.e. the common agreement or arrangement of churches among each other, has decided and expressed in her Church Order. Outside of this, the major assemblies have no right to intervene and act, and they miss all competence and authority - and outside of this their deeds and decisions are not covered by its authority, which was delegated by the churches. Outside of this, they act unauthorized, illicit, and revolutionary.”[7]

To a church which no longer abides by this fully *reformed* (Scriptural) church polity, or even abuses it to exclude faithful churches or believers, the word of the Lord applies:

“Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent. Therefore if you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you” (Rev. 3:3).

[1] J. Ridderbos, *Kerkscheuring: een woord over de crisis in de Gereformeerde Kerken* (Kampen: Kok, 1944), p. 11.

[2] In Dutch edition of the Church Order around 1944 this was article 36.

[3] S. Greijdanus, *Over gereformeed kerkrecht* (Kampen: [s.n.], 1943), p. 11.

[4] P. Deddens, *De ratificeering der besluiten van meerdere vergaderingen*. (Groningen: [s.n.], 1946), pp. 15-16.

[5] P. Deddens, *op. cit.*, p. 14

[6] Joh. Jansen, *Korte Verklaring van de Kerkenordening* (Amsterdam: Ton Bolland, 1976 (herdruk 1^e druk 1923)), p. 167.

[7] S. Greijdanus, *op. cit.*, p. 11.