

A Gift From Heaven

The Bible and Church Government

Where Is The Church?

Golgotha

Lesson 20

REFORMED
EVANGELISM
TASKFORCE

The Bible and Church Government

After Jesus' ascension and especially after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit the method of gathering and organizing the church members changed. The light of the Gospel does not shine over the earth from one central point anymore. From the day of Pentecost on, the glad tidings are proclaimed from an ordinary church building anywhere on earth where the congregation of Jesus Christ gathers to listen to the proclamation of His Word.

Independent Churches

"And on turning I saw seven golden lampstands and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man clothed with a golden girdle round his breast; his head, and his hairs were as white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword and his face was like the sun shining in full strength ... As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches." (*Rev. 1:12-16,20*)

This is a quote from the Revelation which the apostle John received from Jesus Christ while he was in exile on the island of Patmos. Through the use of visions Jesus tells him what will have to happen soon. He is charged to write down his revelation and to send it to the seven churches in Asia Minor. John's first vision in Revelation is essential for an understanding of the government of the church. In this vision the seven churches are pictured as seven candlesticks, since they were bearers of the light of the Gospel. It is interesting to notice what function the candlesticks had in the Old Testament. Both the tabernacle and the temple had a branched candlesticks with seven arms. It was the symbol of a united church, with Jerusalem as its earthly centre. This is where the actual worship of the people took place since God "dwelled" in the temple (*John 4:20*). Even though after the exile synagogues arose everywhere in Palestine, and in other countries where the Jews gathered on the Sabbath, their centre of worship remained Jerusalem.

After the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost the organization of the worship service is changed drastically. In his vision John sees Christ walking between seven separate candlesticks. The seven-armed candlestick of the Old Testament has been replaced by seven separate stands. The seven candlesticks are the image of the seven churches in Asia Minor to which John has to send his written vision. All seven are given individual letters in the chapters 2 and 3 of the book of Revelation. The symbolism of the vision is very important for it indicates that the church of Jesus is no longer gathered and organized from one central point in the world. Every congregation whether it is large or small, now forms a total, independent local church. The light of the Gospel does not shine over the earth from a capital of a worldwide church anymore, but from every church building where the congregation of Jesus comes together to listen to the proclamation of His Word. In the vision of John there is no longer an ecclesiastical centre like the Vatican in Rome or the World Council of Churches in Geneva. In the Reformed Churches the independence of the separate local churches is deemed so important that the Church Order, or constitution of the church, has dedicated a separate article to it. "No church may in any way lord over other churches, no officebearer over other officebearers." (*Art. 84*)

The Relation Between Independent Churches

There is a lot of emphasis on the independence of the churches, but of course that does not imply that the Reformed Churches have no relations with each other at all. Neither does it mean that they do not have each other's welfare at heart. The seven separate lampstands in John's vision are connected by one "like a son of man" - Jesus. He stands in between the seven lampstands. He, the Lord and King of the Church, binds the separate congregations together. All independent churches are made to live under His

dominion. He is the Head of all the independent churches. He holds the seven stars, the angels or leaders of the congregations, in His right hand. In all those churches the leaders have the same calling and task: to promote and spread the glad tidings of the Bible.

The church is not ruled by people. Jesus is in charge. He works through the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. All office bearers in the church acknowledge that. These two also form the foundation on which local churches Cooperate and live together. The local independent churches, all of which recognize Christ as their King, accept the Word of God as the foundation for life and work towards the proclamation of the gospel, are knit together. While each of them retain their independence these churches Cooperate with each other.

That co-operation is very essential. In the first place because sin does not stop at the church doors. Every church has to face the threat of deviation from God's Word. The churches have to protect and warn each other. In the second place cooperation is also necessary in order for the churches to be able to help each other. Only co-operation makes it possible to train ministers, to take care that the gospel is spread all over the world through mission work. Only through co-operation is it possible to help small, or financially poor churches.

Co-operation between independent churches has its foundation in the Bible (*Acts 11:29,30; 15:1,2*). The guidelines for that co-operation are taken from the Word of God. Using the Bible the churches have drawn up a number of rules in order to have church life progress according to the Bible and in a orderly fashion. These Reformed churches have promised to live and act according to the rules as found in the Church Order.

The Offices in the Church

Christ rules His church on earth by using people whom He has entrusted with an office in the church. There are three offices: the servants of the Word or ministers, the elders, and the deacons. The minister and the elders form the "consistory" which has the responsibility of ensuring that all the work that needs to be done in the congregation is done. The consistory has to ensure that the members of the church live according to the Bible. The minister's task is to preach the Gospel during the worship service and to teach the young members of the church. The elders have to take heed as to how the members of the church live and conduct themselves. When necessary, they have to warn the sheep of Jesus not to wander away from the flock. King Jesus wants His subjects to serve Him obediently; the Good Shepherd wants to keep His flock together.

Besides the minister and elders there are also the deacons who help the poor members of the church and those members who have other difficulties. In order to do their work properly, they visit the poor and sick and give financial aid where necessary.

The people whom Jesus entrusts with an office in His Church have to meet certain requirements which are meticulously outlined in Paul's letters to Titus and Timothy (*1 Tim. 3; Tit. 1:5-9*). They are called office bearers or overseers. The Church Order contains the exact rules for choosing the office bearers and what should happen if they do not fulfill their task in obedience to the Bible. The Church Order also explains how the churches should supervise each other by visiting each other's meetings and by having regional and national meetings. Once again, the Church Order derives all its articles from the ultimate authority - the Bible.

The Bible Binds Together

One of the rules in the Church Order reads as follows:

"If anyone complains that he has been wronged by the decision of a minor assembly, he shall have the right to appeal to the major ecclesiastical assembly; and whatever may be agreed upon by a majority vote shall be considered settled and binding, unless it is proved to be in conflict with the Word of God or with the Church Order." (*Art. 31*)

Some Reformed churches have been and still are called "the churches of Article 31". This article describes the very essence of the manner in which churches should Cooperate according to the teachings of the Bible. It is only logical that the decisions that are reached together should be kept by all the churches. If any decision is in conflict with what God says in His Word the decision is void. That is the reason why in church life a simple majority or "half plus one" is not decisive, as in many other areas of life. The Word of God is decisive. No matter how many wise scholars agree on an ecclesiastical decision, only the Bible is able to bring about real co-operation. Only the Bible binds the churches together.

Where Is The Church?

Article 9

There are plenty of churches in our country. Every town has at least a few churches, all from different denominations. How can that be? Does that correspond with one flock and one Shepherd? If the people in all those different churches listen to the voice of the one Shepherd, there should be only one church. Or does the Shepherd have different voices? Where is the church today? Where does Christ call the sheep of His flock together in order to lead them to eternal life? Where is the body of Christ which He feeds and loves?

The Bible Is Your Guide

If all His sheep listened to His voice there would indeed be only one church. But do they all listen to His voice? Sheep wander away from the flock in order to go their own way. Unfortunately, this is a common scenario. A deputy shepherd of the great Shepherd begins to err. And before long the flock which was entrusted to him will trudge behind him off into the wilderness. It still looks like a flock, safely and neatly together with their shepherd, but afterwards they perish together.

That does happen. The Bible shows us how the leaders of God's people often took a road which led away from God, and how they took the people with them (*1 Kings 12:25-30; 16:30-33*). The priests who had to teach the people in the ways of the Lord sometimes led them to do what God had forbidden. There were also false prophets, men who claimed to bring the Word of God but in reality proclaimed their own ideas. The Bible speaks about men who should have been shepherds, but who were so intent on their own honour and profit that they let the children of God starve spiritually (*Mal. 2:6-9; Jer. 27:16; Ezek. 34:1-6*).

During Jesus' life on earth He had to level sharp accusations against the leaders of that time. Jesus warns them, "He who is not with me, is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters" (*Luke 11:23; Matt. 23:13-15; John 10:12-15*). Opposite them, Jesus takes His position as the Good Shepherd. Throughout the history of the church there have always been leaders who lead the flock astray (*2 Tim. 2:14-18*).

The Bible exhorts church leaders to be faithful to their calling and to only preach the Word of God. Besides that the Bible also tells the sheep, the believers, to be alert and to test if their office bearers are indeed faithful (*Acts 20:28-31; Gal 1:8,9; 2 Tim. 3:14-15; 1 John 4:1*).

Real sheep are led passively. But the sheep of the great Shepherd's flock do not have to let themselves be led passively. With the aid of the Bible, we are able to make the distinction between truth and lie. We are able to free ourselves from a leader who has gone astray, and we must do so in order to stay with the Great Shepherd (*Rev. 18:4*).

Looking for the Church

How do you choose a church? Do you evaluate the people in the church? Do you choose a church because of the minister? Or do you go to the church that is the most popular?

Searching for a church in such a way is very dangerous. A church where shepherds have led the flock astray can still have nice people. Conversely, in a church where God's Word is faithfully proclaimed you can be distressed by unfriendly and disagreeable people. You will have to look beyond the human factor, in order to find the right church. At first, distinguishing between a "true" and "false" church may seem like a monumental task. There are so many little differences in doctrines and customs. How can a person sift through all this dogma? Remember this though. If you are distinguishing between "true and false" you should only pay attention to what the church, through its pastors, gives to the people.

The question is, are you really able to hear the voice of Jesus in that church? Is there true pastoral care?

How is the Church Recognized?

The church in which God's Word is faithfully proclaimed can be recognized by the way in which that Word is preached. The preaching should be pure, that is, it should honestly explain God's Word according to its contents and context. Preachers and elders in the church may not say, "This is my opinion". They should humbly say, "This is God's opinion; this is what it says in His Word". If preachers cannot say that sincerely anymore, or will not say that anymore, then they no longer gather the flock together with Christ. Then that church is no longer a safe place for the sheep. And especially not for the lambs of the flock, the children. The lambs are not yet able to distinguish for themselves, therefore, they have to hear the pure voice of the Shepherd.

Besides the preached Word, Christ has also given us visual aids to strengthen our faith. They are called "sacraments". You can also recognize the church by these visible signs.

Jesus gave two aids to His followers: the Lord's Supper and baptism. It is important to know when Jesus instituted the sacraments.

In the night in which He was betrayed by Judas, Jesus celebrated His last passover with His disciples (*Matt. 26:26-29*). The passover was celebrated every year according to God's commandment in order to remember the deliverance out of Egypt. During that meal a lamb was eaten, which was the symbol of the paschal lamb that saved the Israelites from death. But now Jesus was about to sacrifice Himself as the true Paschal Lamb on the cross (*1 Cor. 5:7*). Therefore, He did something very new and wonderful at the end of that meal with His disciples. He took a piece of bread, broke it, and gave a piece to each of the disciples. Then He said, "Take, eat, this is my body, do this in remembrance of me." After that He passed a cup of wine around while He said, "This cup is the new testament in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." Later Paul would add to these words for clarification: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (*1 Cor. 11:23-26*).

The Lord's Supper is a remembrance meal. It helps us remember the suffering and death of Jesus. Bread and wine are the tokens which allow us to see what we hear in the gospel. The broken bread is a sign of the crucified body of Christ, and the wine is a sign of His blood.

However, the Lord's Supper is more than just a remembrance. It is not only a sign, it is also a guarantee. Whoever eats the bread and drinks the wine in true faith is also convinced of the forgiveness of his sins, because that was why Jesus suffered and died. Just as surely as you are eating bread and drinking wine, Jesus died for your sins. The Lord's Supper strengthens your faith.

Baptism was instituted by Jesus shortly before He went to heaven. This sacrament is also a sign and a guarantee. It actually illustrates the gospel. The water which is used for baptism represents the blood of Jesus. Water washes you clean physically. In the same way the blood of Jesus cleanses you from sin, spiritually. That is the sign, and the guarantee is that as surely as water washes away dirt from your body, Christ shed His blood on the cross to wash away your sins if you accept the meaning of baptism in faith.

In the New Testament the Lord's Supper took the place of the Passover, and baptism took the place of circumcision. In the Old Testament circumcision was the sign of the covenant which God had made with Abraham. Baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant of God with the believers and their children. Baptism guarantees the believers that they are ingrafted into the body of Christ, the Church.

In the church of Christ, the sacraments which He has instituted are used as He has instituted them. Therefore, a mark of the church is that the sacraments are administered in the proper manner. Lord's Supper and baptism are two sacraments which give the believers certainty. The believers may be satisfied with just two because Jesus did not institute any more.

There is yet a third and last mark which indicates if you can hear the voice of the Good Shepherd in the church. That is the care for sheep that threaten to fall away. It is called "church discipline". Perhaps that does not sound too friendly to your ears. But do not be

deceived. Church discipline means the same as trying to rescue somebody who is about to have an accident. And what is more natural? Jesus Himself ordered His deputy shepherds to exercise discipline. Naturally, for He is the Good Shepherd. And the Good Shepherd does not want His sheep to wander around without being called back. Even if a sheep does not like it himself the shepherds have to try and bring him back. They might have to use serious admonitions and urgent warnings. Even if a sheep were so obstinate that it had to be cut off from the flock, the purpose remains to make him repent.

The Good Shepherd loves His sheep infinitely. You can read that in your Bible in *Matt. 18:12-14*. The Good Shepherd also knows better than His sheep. He knows what is good for them, and where danger threatens. He punishes because He loves, and because He wants to keep His sheep with His flock.

So what smarter action can you take than to let yourself be led ... by Him.

Golgotha

Luke 23

There are many questions which can be asked about Jesus. Why was Jesus, the Son of God, on earth as a man? What did He accomplish in the short time He was on earth? What was His actual task in our world? No one who reads about Jesus can get around these questions. Was He a world reformer who wanted to liberate oppressed minorities, and who opposed racial discrimination? Did He join protest marches for social rights, for equality and fraternity? Who was Jesus? Why did He die on the cross on Golgotha? The answers to all these questions can only be found in the Bible.

He Has Paid the Debt

Whoever searches for the answer to the question of what Jesus did here on earth can find the answer in the Bible. It is already mentioned in the first chapter of the New Testament. The foster father of Jesus, Joseph, received a mandate from the angel. "...And you shall call his name, Jesus..." (*Matt. 1:21*). That name tells us what He came to do. Jesus means the Lord is Salvation, or the Lord saves. Jesus came into the world to earn salvation for us. The angel also immediately tells Joseph why he is to call his son Jesus. "...For He will save His people from their sins" (*Matt. 1:21*). Jesus came to save people from sin. When John the Baptist saw Jesus approaching him, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (*John 1:29*).

The salvation which Jesus brought is all-inclusive, complete, and perfect. It took away the cause and result of sin, even though man had not met his obligations. His obligation was to love God with all his heart, and, therefore, also his fellow man. Failing to meet that obligation caused a debt. That debt was paid by Jesus. He met our obligations. He also takes away the punishment for our failure, the result of sin. Punishment is the just result of God's anger, but Jesus saves completely. He saves not only from earthly misery and trouble, but His redemption also means peace with God. We are allowed to be His children again. We are saved.

His Life Was Suffering

Jesus, who saved us from sin, suffered during His life on earth. Why did He have to suffer? Could He not have paid our debt in some other, less painful, manner? Jesus suffered to pay for the debt that we had with God. God would not let sin be forgiven unless full and proper payment was made. This not only meant that Jesus had to die on the cross, but also that He had to live a life of suffering on this earth. He offered Himself on the cross in order to bring purification of sins, but His entire life on earth consisted of suffering (*Is. 53:5*). The New Testament describes His sufferings extensively. This suffering began immediately at His birth (*Luke 2:1-7*). The first narrative in the gospel of Matthew after His birth is about Joseph and Mary's flight to Egypt (*Matt. 2:13-18*). Herod, an Edomite, a descendant of Esau wanted to kill the Great Son of Jacob and in that way intended to prevent the "restoration of the kingship of Israel." Herod was so intent on killing the King of Israel that he murdered all the boys of Bethlehem two years and younger. Fortunately, Joseph was warned in a dream and escaped to Egypt.

Jesus' suffering also became obvious when He, at the age of twelve, was not understood by His parents. Rather than being allowed to stay "in His Father's house", Jesus had to return to Nazareth (*Luke 2:41-52*). His suffering continued when He had to deal with the ever growing animosity of the Pharisees and the Scribes. Later He was even misunderstood by His own disciples (*John 6:60-66*).

His suffering climaxed on the cross. Already in the garden of Gethsemane, where He prayed to His Father before His death, the bloody sweat which ran down His body is proof of the agony He suffered. It all culminated on the cross at Golgotha where He was totally forsaken by God for three hours (*Luke 23:44-46; Matt. 27:45,46*).

Jesus knew all His life what would happen to Him. He knew that God would completely forsake Him prior to His death. We cannot imagine how terrible that was. The extent to which Jesus suffered is incomprehensible to us.

The Old Testament already announced this great suffering through the prophets. "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief-, and as one from whom men hide their faces.... He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth" (*Isa. 53:3,7*). In order to heal the life of man Jesus had to suffer and die. Matthew writes, how by healing those who were physically and mentally ill, He fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 53. "This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases'" (*Matt. 8:17; Isa.53:4*). But Jesus' greatest healing miracle was on the cross when He healed the world from the disease of sin.

He Suffered In Our Place

Contemporary theologians state that Jesus was only showing solidarity with our human sufferings. Jesus was on the side of the sick, the oppressed, and those who suffered discrimination. However, Jesus did not just suffer with us or sympathize with us. He suffered in our place. Golgotha was no show of solidarity. It was substitution for us. Jesus' suffering paid for our debt and took away the punishment which we deserved. Jesus did not suffer with us, but for us. This can hardly be emphasized enough. "But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that made us whole and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (*Isa. 53:5-6*). God has transferred all man's debt onto His son. Jesus took the load of guilt upon Himself. He atoned for the guilt of man. He let Himself be beaten by the chastising hand of God. He let Himself be hit by the curse, the judgment of God. It may sound harsh, but it is true to say that Jesus was actually cast off by God for our sake. "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (*Matt. 27:46*).

Peace With God, Peace on Earth

The suffering of Jesus is the fulfillment of the countless sacrifices that were brought in the Old Testament times. Those sacrifices were a foreshadowing of what He did (*Ps. 40:7-9; Heb. 10:1-18*). At the death of Jesus, the debt was paid and the punishment was taken away. The suffering of Jesus resulted in reconciliation with God. When the purification of sin took place, the entrance to the throne of God was opened. That is the reason why the curtain in the temple was rent in two pieces, from top to bottom at the time when Jesus died (*Matt. 27:51*). That curtain was the symbol of the separation between God and His people. Nobody was allowed into the most Holy Place of the temple, for God's throne was there. That partition has now been removed. "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (*Heb. 4:16*). There is once again peace with God. Jesus accomplished His task!

Questions 20

The Bible and Church Government

1. What are the requirements for an elder? (*1 Tim. 3:1-16, Titus 1:5-9*)
2. Is it Biblical to distinguish between "clergymen" and "laymen". Substantiate your answer. Compare *1 John 2:20,21,27* and *Acts 2:1-18*.
3. In the beginning of the Christian church there were more offices than the three that were mentioned in this lesson. Which ones are they and why have these offices become obsolete? (*Matt. 10:1,2; 1 Cor. 9:1; Acts 11:27ff; 1 Cor. 12:23,29; Eph. 4:11-13*)

Where Is the Church?

1. May ministers preach their own opinions as well as God's Word? Why not? (*Rev. 2:18,19; 2 John 10, 11; Tit. 3: 10; 2 Thess. 3:14*)
2. Through discipline, Christ intends to save the sinner. Can you make that clear from a serious case of discipline as related in *1 Cor. 5:1-5*? (especially v. 5)
3. Why is it necessary that the church chooses elders (overseers) and how should they understand their task? (*Acts 20:28-32; 1 Pet. 5:1-4; Tit. 1:5-9*)

Golgotha

1. What did the Jews think of Jesus' suffering? What was the Greek opinion? (*1 Cor 1:18-25*)
2. Jesus is often referred to as *Jesus Christ* in the Bible. Christ means "the anointed one". What was the meaning of Jesus again? What other name was Jesus called? (*Matt. 1:21; John 1:41; 4:25,26*)
3. Jesus says that He not only let God take His life away but that He also laid down His life on His own accord. What does He mean when He says that? (*John 10:17,18*)