How Church Order Can Help Us When We Disagree

Talk of the church’s order can come across as lawyerly and wonkish. So the first thing that needs to be said is that the church’s order is an *expression of a theology*. It’s a practical theology:

- We confess stuff.
- We order our lives according to what we confess.
- By living that way we come to believe our confession all the more.

The order does contain a set of rules, if by “rules” you mean “covenants,” but the rules emerge from what we believe. For example, we ask ministers to subscribe to the confessional Standards of Unity, but we don’t ask that of elders and deacons or of church members. It’s one thing to know that; it’s another thing to reflect on why that might be.

We confess that Jesus Christ was born, lived, taught, died, was resurrected, and is ascended. The question at the heart of the order is, “What kind of people, what kind of society, does the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus create on earth anyway? What kind of people are we to be because of Jesus?” Everything in the order—all the rules we covenant to—must be understood as part of the answer to that question.

So here’s the overall point: *the way we order our life as a church is itself a witness to the gospel.* The medium is the message. Jesus’ teaching and his life fit together, so the church’s polity emerges from the gospel of Jesus and seeks to have us live, and die, like Jesus. But like Jesus, it does not coerce us into it.

So how do authority and assembly function when there is disagreement among members of the body? How is this representative for or how does it relate to the whole church?

**Authority.** When we violate our covenants, there’s no national guard to send in. No police. The gospel contains a fundamental critique of power. The church’s order understands this. The church’s order is radically suspicious of power, especially power at a distance. When in the 1500s the Reformed churches in the Netherlands gave themselves a name, they called themselves “The Churches under the Cross.” The church order is still leading us to the cross.

Which is why the church’s order cannot protect us amid disagreement. The church’s order can neither create nor vouchsafe our unity. In other words, the order does not protect us from our worst selves. People often want the order to protect us from ourselves or from others, but it doesn’t, because Jesus didn’t. Take the order’s theology of authority, for example. The basic way authority works in the Reformed Church is that authority in the
church is limited and delimited. All authority, say the BCO and the Bible, is from Christ. Being suspicious of power, especially power exercised at a distance, the order places most authority where we meet Jesus daily, where we meet those near us every Sunday, where we practice all the Christian disciplines most of the time: in the local church around the Word in font and table and pulpit.\(^1\) Whatever the local church and its consistory cannot do alone, the classis is assigned to do. Whatever the classes cannot do alone, the synods are assigned. This has been an organizing principle in Reformed churches since the 1570s.

**How then shall we live?** At the same time that the order doesn’t protect us from our worst selves, it does seek to form us into sanctified Christians. The order is a repository of wisdom from the saints of the past on how to encourage our best selves, our sanctified selves, our Jesus-like selves. The order wants us to look like Jesus. It keeps its eyes fixed on the eschatological vision of rightly ordered lives as in the kingdom of God and calls us to live that way. It does nod toward the reality of sin in the Disciplinary Procedures, but lawyers will tell you that the Discipline is not nearly complete enough to ensure what we’re used to calling justice. This is because the order keeps its gaze pretty firmly fixed on the church ordered in God’s shalom, not on sin.

The order starts with the vision of the peaceable kingdom of God. And so coercion is out. Power must disappear. When coercion is out and power disappears, one thing that also disappears is the expectation of monolithic consensus. We know this, for example, because in our order we are allowed to disagree with the decision of an assembly. Respect it, yes, but agree? Not necessarily. Bind our lives to it somehow\(^2\), yes; be slaves to it, no. We are slaves to Christ alone, responsible, as the order says, first of all to Christ. Assemblies are neither monolithic nor infallible. The order tells us that having deep disagreements about even important things doesn’t stop us from being the church. It makes us a church in pain. But still the church.

The question then becomes (and the order itself points us to this question): “How can we in pain live with even deep differences, even important differences, such as how we understand Scripture?” For the most part the order doesn’t tell us that. What it does do is show us how to avoid coercion and power. But it doesn’t force us to. Instead it tries to form us like Jesus by working where we are like Jesus and breaking down where we are not.

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\(^1\) The priority of the local in our order is one way to talk about why the Reformed Church in America’s General Synod, unlike for example the PCUSA’s General Assembly (and the CRC’s General Synod, in its way), is not given the authority to make “authoritative interpretations” of the confessions and church order. I am not aware of any Reformed communion whose broadest assembly is given legislative authority to interpret Scripture authoritatively for the whole church. In the Reformed Church’s way of being ordered by the Word, the Christian discipline of interpreting Scripture takes place archetypically in preaching and hearing of the Word in the context of the local church gathered in worship under the supervision of the board of elders.

\(^2\) If we could articulate what it means that decisions of assemblies are “binding” on our lives non-coercively and without the expectation of like-mindedness, we would have progressed a long way toward articulating how the RCA’s order imagines of what the church’s unity consists.
Assemblies. Assemblies are designed to be gatherings of the offices humbly listening in the Spirit and praying for the Word of God to speak to the church. The church is not an interest group society of the like-minded. It is a society of a different kind, and our mind is in our Head, who is in heaven, and we are always on the way. When church assemblies gather primarily to count noses—take votes—when they see taking votes as their primary function, they sacrifice their fundamental listening orientation as church assemblies and become more like civic legislatures composed of interest groups vying to win. The order is radical. It is not the politics we are used to. Vying to win is often our default mode when we gather in assembly, but that’s because we’re used to thinking like legislatures and not like church assemblies. Radically, church assemblies only work as church assemblies to the extent that we live out of our humble, listening, waiting, sanctified selves. When we act like civil legislatures, we employ power. Again, the order doesn’t protect us from power. But power breaks the order down. Because it broke Jesus.

In summary: how does this practical theology of the cross known as the church order help us in disagreements? It assumes humility to work. It breaks down before coercion and power. And so it starts from God’s shalom. And it tells us to expect disagreements because we’re not there. It has wisdom to help us get there, but it doesn’t protect us from each other along the way. Our order is vulnerable in just the ways Jesus was vulnerable, and strong in just the ways Jesus was strong. It calls us to be like Jesus, too. How we order our lives together is itself a witness to the gospel. The medium is the message.