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Church Order of Dort (1619)

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CHURCH ORDER

FORMULATED IN THE NATIONAL SYNOD

CONVENED AND HELD BY ORDER OF THE HIGH AND MIGHTY STATES GENERAL OF THE UNITED NETHERLANDS, AT DORDTRECHT, IN THE YEARS 1618–1619

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1. To maintain good order in the Church of Christ, it is necessary to have in it offices, assemblies, supervision of doctrine, sacraments and ceremonies, and Christian discipline, concerning which [matters the following articles] appropriately deal with.

CONCERNING THE OFFICES

2. There are four kinds of offices: ministers of the Word, Doctors (Professors), elders, and deacons.

3. No one, though he be a professor, elder or deacon shall be permitted to enter the ministry of the Word and sacraments without having been lawfully called thereto; and if anyone acts contrary thereto and, having been frequently admonished, does not desist, the classis shall judge whether he is to be declared a schismatic or is to be punished in some other way.

4. The lawful calling of those who formerly have not been in office, both in the cities and in the country, consists: first, in their election, which shall be carried out after previous fasting and prayer by the consistory and deacons, and this shall not take place without correspondence with the Christian authorities of the respective place, and the foreknowledge or advice of the classis where until now this has been customary. Second, in the examination or investigation both of doctrine and life which shall be done by the classis in the presence of the deputies of the synod or some of the same. Third, in the approbation and approval of the authorities, and thereafter of the members of the local Reformed congregation, when the name of the minister having been announced in the churches for fourteen days (two weeks), no objection is presented. Finally, in the public ordination in the presence of the congregation, which shall take place with proper stipulations and questions, admonitions, prayer and laying on of hands by the minister who conducts the ordination service (or any others, if there are more ministers present) according to the form for this purpose, with the understanding that the laying on of hands may be done in the classical meeting for the newly graduated minister who is sent to the Churches under the Cross.

5. Inviting ministers who are now already in the ministry of the Word and calling them to another congregation shall take place by the

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same method of calling as above, both in the cities and in the country, by the consistory and deacons with the advice and approbation of the classis, to whom the aforesaid called [minister] shall present good ecclesiastical credentials of doctrine and life. And having thus been approved by the magistrate of the respective place and having been presented to the congregation for fourteen days, as above, they shall be installed with previous stipulations and prayers. Without abridging what is previously said, anyone [who has] a valid gift of speaking or any other gift insofar as it can be used in an edifying way without detriment to God's Church and to the good order of the church, the government and synods of the respective Provinces will do well to take note of these things and maintain the necessary order for the best interests of the churches.

6. Also no minister may accept a ministry in any particular manors, hospitals or otherwise unless he has previously been admitted and permitted to do so in accordance with the previous articles and he shall no less than others be subject to the Church Order.

7. No one shall be called to the ministry of the Word without being stationed in a specific place, unless he is sent to preach in various places in the Churches under the Cross or otherwise to establish (new) churches.

8. No schoolmasters, artisans or others who have not followed the prescribed course of study for the ministry shall be admitted to the ministry, unless there is assurance of their singular gifts, godliness, humility, modesty, common sense, and discretion, together with gifts of public speaking. When such persons present themselves for the ministry, the classis shall (if the synod approves) first examine them, and after the classis by the examination finds them acceptable, it shall allow them to exhort for a time, and then further deal with them as it judges shall be edifying.

9. Novices, priests, monks and those who leave any sect shall not be admitted to the ministry except with great care and caution after they have also first been tested for a certain time.

10. A minister once lawfully called may not leave the congregation where he has been unconditionally accepted to accept a call elsewhere without the approval of the consistory and the deacons and of those who formerly have been in the office of elder and deacon, together with the approval of the magistrate and the foreknowledge of classis. Likewise, no other church may accept him before he has presented a lawful testimony of his departure from the church and classis where he has served.

11. On the other hand the consistory, as representing the congregation, shall also be bound to provide their ministers with adequate support and are not to dismiss them without the knowledge and

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judgment of classis, which in case of lack of support shall also judge whether or not the aforesaid ministers are to be transferred.

12. Since a minister of the Word, once lawfully called as above, is bound to the service of the church for life, he shall not be allowed to enter a secular occupation except for great and weighty reasons of which the classis shall take note and judge.

13. If it happens that some ministers because of age, sickness or otherwise become incapable of performing their ministry, they shall nevertheless in spite of this retain the honor and title of a minister, and shall be honorably supported in their need by the church which they have served (likewise the widows and orphans of the ministers generally).

14. If any ministers for the aforesaid or any other reasons must leave their office for a time (which shall not be done without the advice of the consistory), they shall nevertheless at all times be and remain subject to the call of the congregation.

15. No one is permitted, having left the ministry of his church or being in no fixed ministry, to go preaching here and there without the consent of the synod or classis; so also no one may preach or administer the sacraments in another church without the consent of that consistory.

16. The office of the ministers is to continue in prayer and the ministry of the Word, to administer the sacraments, to watch over their colleagues, the elders and deacons, together with the whole congregation, and finally to exercise church discipline with the elders and to see to it that everything is done decently and orderly.

17. Equality shall be maintained among the ministers of the Word concerning the duties of their office, as also in other things as much as possible, according to the judgment of the consistory and (if necessary) of the classis, which shall also be maintained among the elders and deacons.

18. The office of the Doctors or Professors of Theology is to expound the Holy Scriptures and to defend sound doctrine against heresies and errors.

19. The churches shall exert themselves that there are theological students who are supported *ex bonis publicis* (out of the general treasury).

20. In churches where there are more competent ministers the use of exhorters shall be introduced in order by such means to prepare persons for the ministry of the Word, following in this the order especially prepared for this by the synod.

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21. All consistories shall see to it that there are good school masters who not only teach the children reading, writing, languages and liberal arts but also train them in godliness and in the catechism.

22. Elders shall be chosen by the judgment of the consistory and the deacons, so that according to its circumstances each church is at liberty to propose to the congregation as many elders as are needed in order that (unless some obstacle arise) after having been approved and certified by it they may be ordained with public prayers and stipulations; or a double number in order to have half of them chosen by the congregation and to be ordained into office in the same manner, using the prescribed form for this.

23. The office of elder is, besides what is said above in article 16 to be (their office) in common with the minister of the Word, to see to it that the ministers together with their other helpers and deacons faithfully exercise their office, and according to the circumstance of time and place to conduct family visiting for the edification of the

congregation insofar as this can be done before and after the Lord's Supper. especially to comfort the members of the congregation, to teach. and also to exhort others to profess the Christian religion.

24. The same procedure which applies to the elders shall be maintained in the election, approbation and ordination of deacons.

25. The specific office of the deacons is diligently to gather the alms and other goods for the poor and to distribute the same faithfully and diligently according to the requirements of the needy, both residents and strangers, by common consent, to visit and comfort the distressed, and to see to it that the alms are not misused, of which they shall give an account in the consistory and also (if anyone wants to be present) in a congregational meeting, at such a time as the consistory shall see fit.

26. In places where there are charity workers or other distributors of alms the deacons shall seek to keep in close correspondence with them to the end that the alms may better be distributed among those who have the greatest need.

27. Elders and deacons shall serve for two years, and each year one-half the number shall retire and others installed in their place, unless the circumstances and welfare of any church demand otherwise.

28. Since the office of Christian authorities is to promote church services in every way, to recommend the same to their subjects, to help the ministers, elders and deacons in all existing need and to protect them by their good order, all ministers, elders, and deacons are duty bound diligently and sincerely to impress upon the whole congregation the obedience, love and respect they owe the

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magistrates. All ecclesiastical persons shall set a good example to the congregation in this, and by proper respect and correspondence seek to awaken and maintain the favor of the government, toward the churches to the end that each one on each side doing his duty in the fear of the Lord, all suspicion and distrust may be prevented and good unity be maintained for the welfare of the churches.

CONCERNING ECCLESIASTICAL ASSEMBLIES

29. Four kinds of ecclesiastical assemblies shall be maintained: the consistory, the classical meetings, the particular synods, and the general or national (synod).

30. In these assemblies only ecclesiastical matters shall be dealt with and that in an ecclesiastical manner. In major assemblies only that shall be dealt with that could

not be finished in the minor [assemblies], or that which concerns the churches of the major assembly in common.

31. If anyone complains that he has been wronged by a decision of a minor assembly, he may appeal to a major ecclesiastical assembly and that which is decided by majority vote shall be considered settled and binding unless it is proved to conflict with the Word of God or with the articles adopted in this general synod as long as these are not changed by another general synod.

32. The proceedings of all assemblies shall begin with calling on God's name and be closed with thanksgiving.

33. Those delegated to the assemblies shall bring along their credentials and instructions, signed by those who delegated them. Only those [delegated] shall be entitled to vote.

34. In all assemblies a clerk shall be chosen in addition to the president, who shall diligently write down that which is to be recorded.

35. The office of the president is to state and to explain what is to be considered, to see to it that everyone observes good order in speaking, to order the wrangler and those too vehement in speaking to be silent, and, for those those who give heed. Further, his office shall cease when the assembly adjourns.

36. The classis has the same authority over the consistory that the particular synod has over the classis, and the general synod over the particular.

37. In every congregation there shall be a consistory consisting of ministers of the Word and elders, who shall meet at least every week at which the minister of the Word (or ministers, if there are more than one) shall preside in turn and govern the proceeding.

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Also, if the magistrates of the respective places wish, they may have one or two of their number, who are members of the church, [meet) with the consistory to listen and to deliberate concerning matters that take place.

38. It is understood that in places where the consistory is to be newly established, the same cannot take place except with the advice of the classis. Where the number of elders is very small, the deacons shall be included in the consistory.

39. In places where as yet there is no consistory, the classis shall in the meantime do what the consistory is charged to do according to the provisions of this church order.

40. Similarly the deacons shall meet every week in order prayerfully to transact the business pertaining to their office, to which the ministers shall take good heed and, if necessary, be present.

41. The classical meetings shall consist of neighboring churches, each of which shall delegate with proper credentials one minister and one elder to meet at the place and time [set] at the end of each meeting as was seen fit (nevertheless, this is not to be postponed more than three months). In these meetings the ministers shall preside in turn or otherwise be chosen to preside by the same assembly, but the same person may not be chosen twice in succession. Further, the president among other things shall ask each one whether the consistory meetings are held in their churches, whether church discipline is exercised, whether the poor and schools are provided for; finally, whether there is anything for which they need the judgment and help of classis for the proper government of their churches. The minister who was appointed by the previous classis for this purpose shall deliver a short sermon from God's Word, which the others shall critique, and, if it is lacking in anything, they shall point this out. Finally, in the last meeting before the particular synod those who are to attend that synod shall be chosen.

42. In any place where there is more than one minister, they shall all be allowed to appear in classis and have a vote, except in matters that concern their persons or churches in particular.

43. At the close of classical and other major assemblies censure shall be exercised with respect to those who have done anything worthy of censure in the meeting, or who have scorned the admonitions of the minor assembly.

44. The classis shall also authorize at least two of the oldest, most experienced and qualified ministers, annually to visit all the churches in the cities as well as in the country to discern whether the ministers, consistories and schoolmasters fulfill their offices faithfully, maintain purity of doctrine, maintain the accepted order in everything, and promote the edification of the congregation, to-

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gether with that of the youth as is befitting. They shall do this as much as possible with both words and deeds in order that they may fraternally admonish those who are found negligent in one thing or another, and may help by word and deed to direct everything to the peace, upbuilding and the greatest profit of the churches and schools. Each classis may continue these visitors in their function as long as they

wish, unless the visitors themselves, for reasons concerning which the classis shall judge, ask to be discharged.

45. The church in which the classis, also the particular or general synod, meets shall be responsible for delivering the minutes of the meeting to the following one.

46. The instructions concerning matters that are to be considered in major assemblies shall not be written until the decision of preceding synods have been read so that what was once finished is not again proposed unless it is judged necessary to change it.

47. Every year, (unless need requires a shorter time) four or five or more neighboring classes shall meet, to which particular synod two ministers and two elders shall be delegated from each classis. At the close of the particular as well as of the general synod a church shall be designated which shall be charged to set the time and place of the next synod with the advice of classis.

48. Each synod shall be free to request and to continue correspondence with its neighboring synod or synods in such form as it shall judge most profitable for common edification.

49. Each synod shall also appoint certain persons in order to effect all that the synod has decided, both with the government and with the respective classes in its district, also in order together or with a smaller number to supervise all examinations of incoming ministers. Further, they shall extend help to the classes in all other difficulties that arise so that good unity, order and purity of doctrine is maintained and stabilized. They shall keep good records of all their actions in order to give a report thereof to the synod, and, if it is demanded, to give reasons. Also, they shall not be discharged from their task before the synod itself discharges them from it.

50. The National Synod shall ordinarily be held once every three years, unless there is a pressing need to meet earlier. To this (synod) two ministers and two elders from each particular synod, both of the Dutch and Walloon languages, shall be delegated. Further, the church which has the task of setting the time and place of the general synod (if it is to be called within three years) shall gather its particular synod, and inform the neighboring church which is of another language of this, which church shall send four persons there in order by common consent to decide concerning the time and place. The church which is chosen to convene the general synod, when it has

consulted with the classis concerning time and place, shall inform the government in time about the same, so that with its knowledge and (if it wishes also to send someone to the classis) this may be decided in the presence and with the advice of its deputies.

51. Since two languages are spoken in the Netherlands, it is considered advisable that the churches using the Dutch and Walloon languages have their own consistories, classical meetings, and particular synods.

52. Nevertheless it is advisable that in the cities where the aforesaid Walloon churches are found some ministers and elders of both sides should gather every month in order to promote good unity and correspondence with one another and as much as possible to support one another with advice according to need.

CONCERNING DOCTRINE, SACRAMENTS, AND CEREMONIES

53. Ministers of the word, as well as Professors of Theology (which is also fitting for other professors) shall subscribe to the Confession of Faith of the Netherlands churches. Ministers who refuse to do this shall *de facto* be suspended from their office by the consistory or classis until such time that they give a full explanation of this. If they obstinately persist in refusing, they shall be completely deposed from their office.

54. Likewise, schoolmasters shall be required to subscribe to the articles as above, or in place of that to the Christian catechism.

55. No one of the Reformed religion shall undertake to have printed or otherwise distributed any book or writing produced or translated by himself or by another concerning religion unless the same has been examined and approved by the ministers of the Word of his classis, or by the particular synod of professors of theology of these provinces, including also the foreknowledge of his classis.

56. God's covenant shall be sealed for the children of Christians by baptism as soon as its administration can take place, and that in a public meeting when God's word is preached. But in places where few preaching services are held a certain day of the week shall be set aside to administer baptism extraordinarily. Nevertheless, this shall not take place without a sermon being preached.

57. Ministers shall do their best and strive to the end that the father present his child for baptism. In congregations where besides the fathers also godfathers or witnesses are taken to the baptism (which custom in itself is optional and should not be lightly changed) it is fitting that those be taken who hold to pure doctrine and are of pious behavior.

58. In the baptism of young children as well as of adults the minister shall use the forms of the institution and administration of baptism which have been respectively drawn up for that purpose.

59. Adults are by baptism ingrafted into the Christian church and accepted as members of the church, and therefore are duty bound to partake of the Lord's Supper, which they shall promise to do at their baptism.

60. The names of those baptized together with those of the parents and witnesses as well as the date of baptism shall be recorded.

61. Only those shall be admitted to the Lord's supper who, according to the usage of the churches which they join, have made confession of the Reformed religion, together with having testimony of a godly walk, without which also those who come from other churches shall not be admitted.

62. Each church shall administer the Lord's Supper in such a manner as it judges best contributes to edification, but with the understanding that the external ceremonies prescribed in God's word are not changed, all superstition is avoided, and that after the completion of the sermon and the general prayers from the pulpit the form for the Lord's Supper, together with the prayer pertaining to it, shall be read in front of the table.

63. The Lord's Supper shall be administered once every two months, as much as possible. It is also edifying, wherever the circumstances of the churches allow, that the same be done on Easter, Pentecost and Christmas. But in places where as yet there is no organized congregation, elders and deacons shall first be provisionally installed.

64. Since the evening prayers are in many places found to be fruitful, each church following this practice shall do what it deems to be most edifying. But whenever there is the desire to eliminate them, this shall not take place without the judgment of classis, together with that of the authority for the Reformed religion.

65. Where funeral sermons are not held, they shall not be introduced; and where they already have been accepted, diligence shall be exercised to do away with them by the most appropriate means.

66. In times of war, pestilence, national calamities, severe persecution of the churches and other general difficulties, the ministers shall petition the government that by its authority and order public fasting and prayer days may be designated and set aside.

67. The congregations shall observe, in addition to Sunday, also Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, with the following days. Since in most cities and Provinces of the Netherlands, besides these the days

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of the Circumcision and Ascension of Christ are also observed, all ministers, wherever this is still the custom, shall put forth effort with the authorities that they may conform with the others.

68. Ministers shall on each Lord's Day, ordinarily in the afternoon sermons, briefly explain the sum of Christian doctrine contained in the catechism which at present is accepted in the Netherlands Churches in such a way that it may be completed annually, following the division of the catechism itself made for that purpose.

69. In the churches only the 150 Psalms of David, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the 12 Articles of Faith, the Songs of Mary, Zacharias, and Simeon shall be sung. It is left to the option of the churches whether to use or omit the song, O God, who art our Father.

70. Since it is found that up to the present various customs are everywhere observed in matrimonial matters, and because it is fitting to practice uniformity in this, the churches shall keep the custom which they have to this time observed, conformable to God's Word and previous ecclesiastical ordinances, until a general ordinance shall be made for this by the government with advice of the ministers (which shall be requested immediately) to which this church order refers in this article.

CONCERNING CENSURE AND ECCLESIASTICAL ADMONITIONS

71. Inasmuch as Christian discipline is spiritual (in character) and exempts no one from civil trial and punishment, as besides civil punishment ecclesiastical censure is necessarily demanded in order to remove the offense from the church of Christ.

72. When someone sins against the purity of doctrine or godly conduct, insofar as it is secret and has given no public offense, the rule which Christ clearly prescribes in Matthew 18 shall be maintained.

73. Secret sins concerning which the sinner, having been admonished by one person in private or before two or three witnesses, repents, shall not be brought before the consistory.

74. If someone, having been admonished in love concerning a secret sin by two or three persons does not listen, or otherwise has committed a public sin, such shall be

reported to the consistory.

75. Concerning all such sins which by their nature were public or because ecclesiastical admonition has been despised have become public, the reconciliation (when certain signs of repentance are seen) shall take place publicly, by judgment of the consistory. In the country or in smaller cities where there is only one minister this must be done with the advice of two neighboring churches in such a

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form and manner as shall be judged fitting for the edification of each church.

76. One who obstinately rejects the admonition of the consistory or who has committed a public or otherwise gross sin shall be barred from the Lord's Supper. If he, having been barred, shows no repentance after several admonitions, the extreme remedy, namely excommunication, shall finally be taken, following the form prepared for this according to the Word of God; but no one shall be excommunicated except with the previous advice of the classis.

77. Before proceeding to excommunication the obstinacy of the sinner shall be publicly announced to the congregation, explaining the sin, together with the diligence shown him in punishing, barring from the Lord's Supper and by many admonitions, and the congregation shall be exhorted to speak to him and to pray for him. Three such admonitions shall take place. In the first, the sinner shall not be named so that he is somewhat spared. In the second, with the advice of classis his name shall be mentioned. In the third, the congregation shall be informed that unless he repents he shall be excommunicated from the fellowship of the churches so that his excommunication, if he remains obstinate, will take place with the tacit approbation of the churches. The time between the admonitions shall be left to the judgment of the consistory.

78. When an excommunicated person wishes to be reconciled with the congregation by way of repentance, it shall be announced to the congregation before the celebration of the Lord's Supper, or otherwise beforehand according to circumstances, to the end that at the next Lord's Supper (insofar as no one knows of anything to bring forward to the contrary) he may be reinstated publicly with profession of his conversion, following the form for this purpose.

79. When ministers, elders or deacons commit a public gross sin which is a disgrace to the church or is punishable by the authorities, the elders and deacons shall immediately be deposed from office, but ministers shall be suspended. Whether the minister shall be completely deposed from office shall be up to the judgment of the classis.

80. Further, among the gross sins that are worthy of being punished by suspension or deposition from office these are the principal ones: false doctrine or heresy, public schism, public blasphemy, simony, faithless desertion of office or intrusion into another's office, perjury, adultery, fornication, theft, acts of violence, habitual drunkenness, brawling, filthy lucre, in short, all sins and gross offenses which make the perpetrator dishonorable before the world and which in any private member of the church would be considered worthy of excommunication.

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81. Ministers of the Word, elders and deacons shall exercise Christian censure among themselves and admonish one another in a friendly way concerning the exercise of their offices.

82. To those who move away from their congregations a certificate or testimony of their conduct shall be given by the decision of the consistory under the seal of the churches, or where there is no seal signed by two (persons).

83. Further, the poor who move for sufficient reasons shall be given assistance by the deacons with discretion, also notion on the back of their certificate the place where they wish to go and the help that has been given to them.

84. No church shall in any way lord it over another church, no minister over other ministers, no elder or deacon over other elders or deacons.

85. In indifferent matters the foreign churches which have different customs from our own shall not be rejected.

86. These articles concerning the lawful order of the churches have been so formulated and adopted by common consent that, if the welfare of the churches demands otherwise, they may and ought to be altered, added to or diminished. Nevertheless, no individual congregation, classis or synod shall be permitted to do this, but they shall diligently seek to maintain them until [it] is otherwise ordered

by the General or National Synod.

So done and decided in the National Synod in Dordrecht the 28th of May, 1619.





Signed with our knowledge. And was signed:

Johannes Bogermannus, Pres. of Synod

Jacobus Rolandus, Assessor

Bermannus Faukelius, Praesidis Assessor

Sebastionus Damman, Clerk of Synod
Festus Hommius, Clerk of Synod

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