

Are Deacons Members of the Session?

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Do deacons belong to the Session or not? Generally speaking in Presbyterian circles, the answer is no. Deacons hold their own meetings. They may advise the Session of elders on various matters within their sphere of operation, but in general they are guided and directed by the ruling body of elders.

But this is not always the practice. In many churches of continental Reformed persuasion, deacons and elders together form the ruling body of the church. Sometimes deacons are removed when discussion concerns pastoral methods, but the trend in many churches today is for more and more involvement of the deacons in the matters of the ruling Session. One need only look at the current practice (and church order) of the Christian Reformed Churches to name but one example.

I don't know how much this trend might be evident in churches of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, but it is surely an issue that ought to be examined. Why is it that Reformed and Presbyterian churches seem to differ on this point? Of course, the only way the point can properly be resolved is by going back to the Word of God and determining there the way that Christ would have His church ruled.

Yet as a preliminary to that study, I would like to investigate in this article the more historical question. Is it really true that Reformed churches have always differed with Presbyterians on this point? Or is the current practice in many Reformed churches a move away from their own heritage? As I hope to show, the current trend of including deacons as full members of a ruling Session was certainly not the practice of the Reformed fathers.

At the great Synod of Dort 1618-1619 the Arminians challenged the Reformed fathers by arguing that Article 30 of the Belgic Confession was in conflict with the church order and Scripture, as regarding the constitution of the Session, and ought to be changed. The Reformed did not accept this interpretation of the Confession and thus did not acquiesce to the demands of the Arminians in this respect.

What lay behind this decision? And what had the actual rulings and practice of the Reformed churches up to this point in time been, with respect to the constitution of the Session? In what follows I hope briefly to outline the developments and decisions of the Reformed churches in this respect, firstly of those in France, and then of those in the low countries.

On May 25th, 1559, the first Synod of the French Reformed churches officially met with delegates representing 50 (out of a possible 75) local churches. At this first Synod the French Confession (drafted by Calvin) was adopted. Since this French Confession was to be the close model for de Bres's Belgic Confession, it is important to note that the French Confession does not make any allusion whatsoever to the constitution of a Session (cf. Art. 29).

Calvin (the draftsman) himself understood the Session to be composed of elders (cf. Inst. IV:xi:6), and this was also the practice of the churches in Geneva.[\[1\]](#)

However the first French Synod also published a church order (the "*Discipline ecclesiastique*") which read in Art. 20:

The elders and deacons are the senate of the church of which the ministers of the Word shall take the chair.[\[2\]](#)

So while the Confession did not state it explicitly, the understanding of the French Reformed churches regarding the constitution of the Session was at first different from Calvin (and also from the Dutch tradition), as the French were in a number of other matters! Deddens in fact shows that the French conception of the task of a deacon was heavily influenced by Roman Catholicism (e.g., in matters pertaining to assistance with preaching and sacraments, their understanding was identical to the relation between bishop and deacon in contemporary Roman Catholicism).[3] This all changed with the 7th Synod of La Rochelle (1571) under the very capable direction of the chairman, Bees, from Geneva. Here the church order was modified stating:

The ministers and elders form the Session, wherein the ministers shall preside, and the deacons may assist whenever the Session deems such appropriate.[4]

The Synod of Nimes 1572 however stated more fully:

The ministers of the Word of God, together with the elders, constitute the consistory of the church, over which the ministers must preside. And the deacons may and must be present at the assembly of the council, in order to be able to serve (the consistory) with their advice, just as we have up till now used them with success in the government of the church and since they were called to the task of elders. And in the future the deacons, joined with the pastors and elders shall have the direction of the church.[5]

Here we see that the French inclusion of the deacons with the consistory was NOT because they viewed the office of deacon as a ruling office, but because they viewed their deacons as called at the same time to be assistant elders. Here they were evidently able to give some “after the fact” justification of their actual practice, while at the same time being careful not to blur (theologically) the Scriptural distinction between the office of elder and that of deacon. Nevertheless, this Synod still did not permit deacons to take part in discussion of discipline cases.[6]

In turning to the Reformed churches in the low countries, we come first to the Belgic Confession of Guido de Bres, published in 1561. As we have said, this was very closely modeled on the French Confession of 1559, yet the wording with respect to the offices of the church is slightly different.

In Art. 30 it is stated:

Wij geloven...dat er ook Opzieners en Diakenen (molten) Zion, om met de herders to Zion awls even road (Lat. quasi senates) der Kirk. [We believe...that there (must) also be overseers and deacons, who together with the pastors form a sort of a Council of the church][7]

Rutgers, the well known expert in church polity of late last century, noting the “awls” (and Latin “Quasi”) points out that the confession at this point is merely making a comparison between the officers of the church, and the senators on a town council. No church political point is made regarding the proper composition of a Session.

The general task of each office is merely circumscribed (which a reading of the complete article shows clearly).[8] This was also the explanation current at the time of the Synod of Dort. The explanation was challenged some years later by the Englishman Seldon (an Erastian delegate to the Westminster Assembly) who alleged that the Synod of Dort had changed the meaning of the Confession by introducing the word “quasi” (“as if”) in the Latin translation. Voetius (Pol.Eccl. Pars III, Lib. I Tract. I Cap. VII, p. 62ff) (a delegate to the Synod of Dort 1618-19) however took Seldon to task, showing that in all the versions of the Confession prior to the Synod of Dort 1618-19, the text read “awls even Raedt der Kercke” (“as if a council of the church”), thus intentionally distinguishing the officers and authority of the church from

that of the state.[\[9\]](#)

Thus, we may conclude that, like the French Confession, the Belgic Confession did not make any definitive statement on the constitution of the Session.

In 1568 a large gathering of office bearers from the low countries took place to prepare for the first Synod of the Reformed churches there. This Convent of Bezel (as it was called) also drafted a church order in which it was clearly stated that deacons were not a part of the Session (cf. Cap. 2 & 3; Cap. 4:1,3,S,7,9,10ff).

Yet the first Synod in Emden 1571 (which was highly influenced by the French who sent delegates) stated that deacons were a part of the Session![\[10\]](#)

At the Synod of Dort 1574 this confusion was cleared up with a declaration declaring the intent of the decision of the Synod of Emden:

In explanation of the articles of the Synod of Emden: The ministers of the Word, elders and deacons form a Consistory such that the ministers and elders shall assemble together alone, and also the deacons shall assemble separately in order to handle their respective business. However in places where there are few elders the deacons may be allowed to attend (the elders meeting) at the pleasure of the Consistory. The deacons must attend whenever they are called to do so by the Consistory.[\[11\]](#)

This way of putting things was continued by the various successive Synods in the low countries.

Thus the Synod of Middelburg 1581 stated:

There shall be a Session (kerkeraad) in all churches, consisting of Ministers of the Word and Elders.[\[12\]](#)

In answer to a particular question as to whether the deacons may be allowed to attend Session meetings where there are few elders, the Synod said:

It is permitted as long as the Session requests their counsel and help. In addition they may also ordinarily attend Session so (long as) they serve both offices, that of elder and that of deacon.[\[13\]](#)

Here again we see that as with the French churches, when deacons were allowed to attend Session meetings, they were considered to be functioning not as deacons, but as elders. In the Dutch tradition, the deacons' attendance tended to be restricted to cases where there were very few elders. It should also be noted that the deacons were added for counsel and assistance, but nowhere is it said that they thereby became part of the Session proper. The idea was to include them for the sake of extra wisdom in discussion. The wording is in fact so cautious that it seems very doubtful that they ever had voting rights (even in cases of few elders). This is confirmed by the later objection of the Arminians to the Belgic Confession, for part of their objection was that the Belgic Confession seemed (to them) to suggest that deacons could have such voting rights (a practice unheard of!).

The Synod of s'Gravenhage 1586 continued the same line, and added the wording that was to become standard in Reformed churches for centuries:

And where the number of Elders is very small, the deacons shall be taken up along with the Session.[\[14\]](#)

Again the wording is cautious, and does not actually say that in such instances the deacons form a part of the Session itself. This wording was only slightly changed by the Synod of Dort

1618-1619, which stated that “the deacons MAY be taken up along with the Session.” As we have noted, at this Synod the Arminians argued that the Belgic Confession gave deacons voting rights on Session.[\[15\]](#)

However the Synod left the Confession as is, understanding the relevant clause not to be speaking of the constitution of a Session (see above). Therefore it did not see any contradiction between the Confession (Art. 30) and the Church order.

Thus from the beginning of the Reformation the general Reformed line has been to limit the constitution of the Session to elders only, and to permit deacons at times to attend (especially when the number of elders is few) and to give their wisdom, but not to allow them any part in the ruling of the church. When deacons attend such Session meetings, Reformed polity has consistently considered them not to be functioning in their office as deacon, but to be performing a special service and as such functioning as an elder.

It may be of interest to note that in 1644 four deacons from Rotterdam desiring to be considered part of the Session (but the Session having refused) appealed to the classis (using as argument the Synod of Emden 1571). The classis denied the appeal, so the brothers appealed to the next national synod (never held). At the Synod of Utrecht 1905, the relevant article of the Church order was modified to state:

And where the number of the Elders is small, the Deacons may be taken up along with the Session according to local regulation; the which shall always occur where the number is less than three.[\[16\]](#)

Given the clear history of the Reformed practice on this matter, we as churches should be doubly careful to be sure that we have solid Biblical grounds if we choose to depart from traditional Reformed church polity. The churches of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church should not think that this is merely a Presbyterian versus a continental Reformed matter. It is rather a generally Reformed position (session = elders only) versus a departure from Reformed tradition (session = elders and deacons). Is such a departure really biblically defensible?

Endnotes

[\[1\]](#) A. D. R. Polman, *onze Nederlandse Geloofsbelijdenis*, Vol. 4, p. 25.

[\[2\]](#) *Bekennnisschriften und K.o. der nach Gottes Wort ref. Kirche herausg. von W. Niesel*, Munchen 1938, p. 77.

[\[3\]](#) P. Deddens, *De Positive van de Diakenen ten Anacin van den Kerkeraad* (1948), p. 16.

[\[4\]](#) *La disc. ref. de France*, par Dyes, Orleans 1675, p. 144.

[\[5\]](#) D. Huisseau, *op cit.* pp. 144-145.

[\[6\]](#) Polman, *op cit.* vol. 4, p. 28.

[\[7\]](#) Note that the points made in the following discussion are made with respect to the official text of the Confession. The English translation in common use today is very misleading at this point.

[\[8\]](#) F. L. Rutgers, *Kerkelijke Adviezen*, vol. 1, p. 277.

[\[9\]](#) *Politica Ecclesiastica*, Pars III, Lib. I Tract. I Cap. VII, p. 62ff. Note too that in a similar way the Genevan Ecclesiastical ordinances of 1541 and 1561 spoke of the four offices for the government of the church (minister, teacher, elder, deacon) while deacons were at the same time excluded from the consistory. No contradiction between terminology and practice was understood by this way of speaking.

[\[10\]](#) F. L. Rutgers (ed.) *Acta van de Nederlandsche Synoden der 16e eeuw*, s'Gravenhage 1889, p. 58.

[\[11\]](#) Rutgers (ed.), *Acta*, p. 139.

[12] Rutgers (ed.), Acta, pp. 385-386.

[13] Rutgers (ed.), Acta, p. 405.

[14] Rutgers (ed.), Acta, p. 495.

[15] Acta et Scripta synodalia dordracena ministrorum remonstrantium: I:96f. It should be noted that the Arminians at the time were attempting to find as many contradictions in the Confession as they could, for part of their general platform was that the Confession could not be held to be stringently binding on all office bearers. Their attempt at this point to show the Confession to be in conflict with the Church order and practice of the Reformed Churches, was thus in line with their general platform.

[16] P. Deddens, De Positive van de Diakenen ten Anacin van den Kerkeraad (1948), p. 15.