

CO-CanRC article 61

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TEXT

The consistory shall admit to the Lord's supper only those who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life.

Members of sister-churches shall be admitted on the ground of a good attestation concerning their doctrine and conduct.

APPROACHES TO LAW

How should one read a legal text? This is the question of “hermeneutics”, the exercise of “interpretation”.

Scriptural background

In Scripture, the word usually translated “law” is “Torah”. It’s meaning is somewhere between the English “law” and “guideline”. Non-compliance with a law could be justified (e.g. Matthew 12:1-8).

One common Hebrew practice where law is concerned is to describe a principle by means of an illustration. Thus the principle of taking measures to avoid the injury and death of others is illustrated with fencing your roof, Deuteronomy 22:8.

Another Hebrew practice is to use *pars pro toto* (“part for the whole”). Often the “part” is the most extreme form of the “whole”. Thus the commandment “You shall not murder” also covers hatred and name-calling, Matthew 6:21-26.

The application of law occurred through “the elders in the gate”. Thus the application of law meant the practice of “wisdom in the gate”.

As Church Polity is formed and practiced in a context where Scripture is held in high regard, expressions of church law often follow Biblical patterns. It is one reason why Dort Polity is very brief.

Thus the approach to church law should allow for the approach we find in Scripture to Torah. It means that leaders in the church need to practice “wisdom in the gate”.

Modern approaches

In modern societies there are basically three approaches to a legal text to which individuals may tend to a great or lesser extent.

- Positional: Interpret the text literally. Apply it strictly, to all cases it covers and not to any cases it does not cover.

For example: an individual caught speeding in a 30km/hr school zone at 4:55pm because of a medical emergency receives a fine because “it’s the law”.

- Principal: Interpret the text in line with the underlying principles. Apply it in wisdom, allowing for exceptions.

For example: an individual caught speeding in a 30km/hr school zone at 4:55pm because of a medical emergency receives a warning, not a fine because a medical emergency justifies speeding.

- Purpose: Interpret the text in line with the purpose it seeks to achieve. Apply it in wisdom, allowing for exceptions.

For example: an individual caught speeding in a 30km/hr school zone at 4:55pm because of a medical emergency receives a warning, not a fine because it is almost 5:00pm and there were no children around.

Because church members function in their societal context, the approach to church law should take into consideration the approaches found in society. When church leaders seek to apply church law, they should be mindful of all three approaches and seek the application that honours them all, and not an application that plays out one against the other. In the words of the Supreme Law-giver: “These (justice and mercy and faithfulness) you ought to have done, without neglecting the others (tithing mint and dill and cumin).” (Matthew 23:23).

PRINCIPLES UNDERLYING THIS ARTICLE

References to confessional documents imply the Scripture texts they list.

- Nicene Creed, BC 27, LD 21: There is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church
- BC 35, LD 30: Admission to the Lord’s table is on condition of:
 - covenant (church) membership,
 - true faith,
 - godliness
- 1Cor 11:28: Attendance at the Lord’s table is a personal responsibility, exercised following self-examination
- 1Cor 5:13; Matt. 18:17; 2Thess. 3:6,14-15: Admission to the Lord’s table is a communal responsibility
- BC 32, LD 31: That communal responsibility is exercised under the leadership of the elders

PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE

- To safeguard the holiness (godliness) and apostolicity (faith) of the church as it celebrates
- To safeguard the (covenantal) unity and catholicity of the church as it celebrates

POSITIONED TEXT OF THIS ARTICLE

- The **consistory** (minister + elders) decided admission for the celebration locally
- Admission is restricted to **only** those who meet certain conditions
- The conditions to be met are:
 - **Public profession of the Reformed faith**
Comments:
 - Public profession of the Reformed faith implies covenant (church) membership
 - Faith lives in the heart, thus only the individual can testify to their faith
 - **Godly life**
Comments:
 - Godly life is visible, thus also others can testify to a walk of life
 - Scripture requires the testimony of two or three; one of the “two” can be the individual (cf. John 8:17-18)
- The consistory **shall** also **admit** who meet certain conditions
Comments:
 - the article does not say “shall only be admitted”
- They are **members of sister-churches**
Comments:
 - “sister churches” = local churches in the same federation and local churches in other federations with whom the CanRC have a sister church relationship
 - They have an **attestation** (concerning)
 - They hold the reformed faith (= **doctrine**)
 - They lead a godly life (= **conduct**)

JURISPRUDENCE

[GS-CanRC 2010 art. 151 cons. 3.3 re Article 43](#)

Text

[Proposed Joint Church Order] Article 43 – Admission to the Lord’s Supper

A considerable number of churches wrote to Synod Burlington-Ebenezer commenting on the current wording of this Article. Many of these comments highlight dissatisfaction with the expression “biblical church membership” and wonder what it means and how it will be applied. The churches in our federation are reminded that the elders of the local church are directly responsible for the doctrine and life of their members. Visitors, on the other hand, constitute “exceptions” and it needs to be understood that “exceptions” are always hard to regulate. Notwithstanding this, the COC [Church Order Committee] is asked to consider the following:

- a) The printing of this article in three paragraphs would clarify the fact that the first part deals with the responsibility of the consistory, the second part with the participation of members, and the third part with the admission of visitors.
- b) The admission of visitors from churches with which we maintain ecclesiastical fellowship is best served by a letter of testimony, but it should be understood that very few churches in North America are familiar with such a practice.
- c) The admission of visitors from other churches has historically been viewed as an exception to the rule and needs to be regulated locally by the elders.
- d) A number of churches cite those biblical passages that refer to the testimony of two or three witnesses (Deut 19:15; John 5: 31, 8:13, etc) and thus conclude that a verbal testimony is insufficient. It should be noted, however, that these passages all deal with legal or judicial proceedings. There is disagreement as to whether these passages can be applied to the celebration of the sacrament.

The COC is urged to adopt the following re-wording of the Article:

The consistory shall supervise participation at the Lord’s Supper.

Only those members who have made public profession of the Reformed faith and lead a godly life shall be admitted by the consistory. Visitors who profess the Reformed faith may be admitted to the Lord’s Supper provided that the consistory secures from them a satisfactory testimony about their doctrine and life, in either written or verbal form.

Implications

On the weight and authority of considerations see the article “[Acts: Types of Texts and Their Authority](#)”.

[GS-CanRC 2013 art. 149 cons. 3.3 re Article 43](#)

Text

[Proposed Joint Church Order] Article 43 – Admission to the Lord’s Supper

A number of churches wrote about the current wording of this article, which refers to the consistory admitting “visitors who profess the Reformed faith provided that it secures from them a satisfactory testimony in either written or verbal form about their doctrine, life and church membership.” There continues to be concern that an individual guest may give a verbal testimony about his own doctrine, life and church membership, while the greater responsibility to provide such a testimony should rest with the visitor’s consistory. However, as Synod Burlington 2010 noted, “The elders of the local church are directly responsible for the doctrine and life of their members. Visitors, on the other hand, constitute ‘exceptions’ and it needs to be understood that ‘exceptions’ are always hard to regulate... The admission of visitors from churches with which we maintain ecclesiastical fellowship is best served by a letter of testimony, but it should be

understood that very few churches in North America are familiar with such a practice” (Article 151). Nevertheless, because of the Biblical principle of establishing truth on the basis of two witnesses, the joint committee ought to consider making an addition to the wording of the proposed article to reflect a preference for a written testimony about the member from his consistory.

Implications

On the weight and authority of considerations see the article “[Acts: Types of Texts and Their Authority](#)”.

Neither GS 2010 nor GS 2013 considered the procedure outlined in the Proposed Joint Church Order to be at odds with Scriptural principles regarding admission to the Lord’s table.

GS-CanRC 2016 art. 104 cons. 3.7

Text

3.7 Because the situation within the GKv at the local level is “fluid” and there are many differences in practice between local churches when it comes to, for example, living common law, practicing homosexuals, and women in office, the CanRC can no longer automatically accept statements made by local consistories of the GKv. For this reason, it would be prudent to temporarily suspend the operation of the EF rules 4 and 5. These rules are:

4. The churches shall accept one another’s attestations or certificates of good standing, which also means admitting members of the respective churches to the sacraments upon presentation of that attestation or certificate.
5. The churches shall open their pulpits for each other’s ministers in agreement with the rules adopted in their respective churches.

Synod agrees with the CRCA-SRN recommendation that “consistories are urged to exercise due diligence to ensure that those whose attestations from the GKv are accepted are sound in doctrine and conduct.”

Implications

GS 2019 allowed for attendance of individuals at the Lord’s Supper in situations where simply an attestation would not be considered sufficient for such attendance. GS 2019 assumed that consistories have instruments or procedures available to them by which to ensure that individuals are sound in doctrine and conduct. Following this decision, many CanRC adopted a series of questions that would be asked of GKv members seeking to attend the Lord’s Supper.

SCENARIOS

What if an individual seeks to attend the Lord’s Supper and comes without an attestation?

Mindful of the principles underlying this article as well as the purpose of this article, and noting that this article says nothing about this situation, a consistory should undertake action analogous to what the article indicates. This means that a consistory should be satisfied that the individual:

- is a covenant (church) member. This can be done on the testimony of the individual.

Comments:

- With respect to this matter a consistory may weigh how connected the individual is to the congregation over which it has oversight: there is a difference between the travelling businessman who happens to be in town and the overseas grandma who is staying for 3 months.
- The testimony of the individual would be regarding their current membership and regarding their willingness to be a member of the consistory’s church.

- Assuming there is sufficient time prior to the celebration, it would be helpful if this testimony is verified by contacting the home church of the individual
- confesses the Reformed faith. This can be done via an interview or questionnaire. In substance the standard used for those seeking to publicly profess their faith should be used for the individual.
- leads a godly life. This can be done on the testimony of the individual and of a member of the congregation in good standing.

The consistory should issue a testimony to the consistory that has oversight over the individual (such a testimony is sometimes referred to as a “reverse attestation”). Analogous to attestations for communicant members, that testimony should be given to the individual to hand in to their consistory. It would be wise to send a letter to the consistory that has oversight over the individual, informing them to expect a testimony from the individual.

Admission to the Lord’s table should be decided upon by the consistory prior to the worship service. It is proper for the consistory to set a cut-off time for this process.