

Overture 2

Administration of Sacraments, Christchurch Presbytery

Overture from Christchurch Presbytery

Re: Administration of the Sacraments by Other than Ministers

The Christchurch Presbytery respectfully overtures Synod 2008 as follows:

1. That the Church Order Committee consider the consistency of the concessionary phrase “ordinarily by a minister of the word” in article 57 of the *Church Order*, in view of the unambiguous teaching in our confessions that the sacraments should only be administered by a minister of the word.
2. That the Church Order Committee report to Synod 2011 any changes to the *Church Order* and/or the confessions that might be required to ensure consistency.

Grounds

1. There is an apparent conflict between this concession and the statement in WCF27:4, which in reference to the sacraments states that “*neither may be dispensed by any but a minister of the Word, lawfully ordained.*” There is a possible inconsistency with Article 30 of the Belgic Confession which *prima facie* limits the administration of the sacraments to ministers only.
2. This inconsistency has implications for the confessional subscription of office bearers, which requires office bearers to teach diligently and defend faithfully the doctrines of the church as taught in the Belgic and Westminster Confessions.¹
3. Aside from confessional concerns, a change in practice whereby elders were to administer the sacraments may have pastoral implications within individual congregations. Clarification from synod resulting in a consistent practice within our denomination would mitigate such concerns.

Discussion

1. Background

This matter was discussed by Christchurch Presbytery in November 2004. The minutes of that meeting record the following:

Letter from Christchurch Session

... [The] request for advice from Christchurch session was dealt with. This was in relation to a perceived contradiction between Article 27(4) of the Westminster Confession and Article 57 of the Church Order. Christchurch sought advice on how to reconcile the Church Order's use of the word “ordinarily,” with regard to the administration of the sacraments, with the WCF wording, “neither may be dispensed by any but a minister of the Word, lawfully ordained.”

We agreed to be guided by the explanation given in the Church Order Commentary (RCNZ) (p.123), in which light it could be seen that no contradiction existed between the Church Order, the Westminster Confession, or the Belgic Confession (Article 30). Christchurch delegates accepted the advice given.

In view of the impending number of vacancies in Christchurch Presbytery, the matter was again raised

¹ The *Form of Subscription* appears to require more than simple agreement with ‘the system of doctrine’ as taught in our Confessional statements. It refers to “system of doctrine” in the first paragraph, but then “doctrine” in the second and third, “doctrines” in the fourth, and finally “any particular doctrine” in the fifth. The Guidelines to the FOS speak of “all the doctrines” – emphasis in the original. The fourth paragraph of the FOS sets out the procedure to be followed where an office bearer differs from the confessions. Even given the opacity of the FOS, a simple sessional or presbyterial fiat sits uncomfortably with the high standard set by the FOS.

at its November 2007 meeting of Christchurch Presbytery. The draft minutes of that meeting read as follows:

Lord's Supper and baptism services

Bishopdale raised the following matter: Article 57 of the Church Order states that the sacraments shall be administered by the authority of the session in a public worship service (ordinarily by a minister of the Word) with the use of prescribed forms. This article anticipates that someone other than a minister can administer the sacraments. However, our practice as churches has been to almost invariably insist that only a minister should do this. Given the vacancies in Cornwall Street and Dovedale, is there a possibility of elders administering the sacraments from time to time?

The chairman's ruling that this matter required a gravamen to synod was overturned. It was noted that Presbytery's ruling of November 2004 [given above] continued in effect.

To our knowledge this advice has not been acted upon, firstly because of a perceived contradiction between the Church Order concession and our confessional standards, and secondly because of potential pastoral issues that might arise from elders, rather than a minister, administering the sacraments.

2. Sources

The question as to who may administer the sacraments is somewhat peculiar to the RCNZ, and results from the modified Church Order that was adopted by our synod in 1977. At base, the issue stems from the (*de jure*, if not *de facto*) adoption of a two office view in our Church Order (article 2). Where a three office view is maintained the question should not arise.²

2.1. Scriptural Data

There is little direct scriptural evidence pertaining to the question as to who may administer the sacraments. The Old Testament provides little direct assistance, as heads of households circumcised their sons and administered the Passover.

In New Testament times, given that the Lord's Supper was to be celebrated in the context of a meeting of the faith community (cf. Acts 2, I Cor 11), it would seem that the one leading the worship service would also administer the sacrament.³ This would be consistent with the first celebration by our Lord, where Jesus himself offered the elements to the disciples.

2.2. Church Order

Our Church Order differs from that of our sister churches in specifying that there are only two kinds of offices.⁴ The issue does not arise where a three office view is held and the ministry of the word and sacraments is reserved to the ministers. This is the case in a number of our sister churches, and also in our confessional standards.

The original Church Order of Dort, following Calvin⁵, provided for four offices in the church: doctor, minister, elder and deacon.⁶ This was followed by the CRCNA until 1965, when the office of Doctor ("Professor of theology") was deleted from its article 2.⁷

The CRCA Church Order provides *The Offices instituted by the authority of Christ to render services*

² Ordinarily(!) However the Australian *Church Order* does allow for elders to "g. administer the sacraments (but only) in special circumstances", despite their Church Order specifying three offices (art. 2)

³ However, it might be argued that the question only arises because of the particular practice of our churches whereby the celebration of the sacrament requires the use of a particular form. "Leaderless" celebrations could be conceived – e.g. analogous to prayer in the round.

⁴ Despite this, the RCNZ CO perpetuates the three office division in subsequent articles.

⁵ Inst. IV;iii:4ff

⁶ Van Dellen & Monsma, p. 24

⁷ *ibid.*

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in his church are those of the Minister of the Word, the Elder and the Deacon. These offices differ from each other only in mandate and task.

The CanRC Church Order provides for three offices (article 2), and does not have the word ‘ordinarily’ in their article 56 (our article 57).

The OPC Book of Church Order chapter 6 specifies three offices, and in IV:4 provides: “Although the efficacy of the sacraments does not depend upon the piety or intention of the minister, they are not to be administered by any private person but only by a minister of Christ, called to be a steward of the mysteries of God.”⁸

This brief survey suggests that our Church Order is out of step with a number of our sister churches, all of which hold to a three office view. Hence, for them, the issue of who may administer the sacraments need not arise.

2.3. Confessional Data

Article 30 of the Belgic Confession states the (three!) offices of the church. It provides that:

“there must be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments; also elders and deacons, who, together with the pastors, form the council of the church.

On the face of it, and consistent with the Church Order of Dort, this limits the administration of the sacraments to the minister, and excludes the elders and deacons from administering them.

Article 27(4) of the Westminster Confession is unambiguous in its wording:

There be only two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the Gospel: that is to say, Baptism, and the Supper of the Lord: neither of which may be dispensed by any but by a minister of the Word lawfully ordained.

That this minister was distinct from the ruling elders is evident from the *Form of Presbyterian Church Government* which speaks of the ‘ordinary and perpetual offices of the church as pastors, teachers, and other church-governors, and deacons’, the administration of the sacraments being a role of the Pastors only.

The other two subordinate standards of the RCNZ do not specifically deal with the question.

2.4. Church Order Commentaries

Van Dellen and Monsma, commenting on the CRCNA Church Order, note that,

“The preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments logically belong together. The sacraments are seals upon the testimony of the Word. For this reason Scripture unites the two, and from the very beginning of Christian church history they have been administered by the same class of office-bearers. The apostles preached and baptized. Their logical successors as preachers are the ministers of the Gospel. Consequently the ministers of the Gospel and they only are the rightful administrators of baptism today.”

The context indicates that the same applies to the Lord’s Supper. This would be consistent with a three office view, where the minister indeed is the minister of the word and sacraments.

Commenting on the RCNZ Church Order, Vanderpyl writes;

Only those who have been lawfully called to the ministry of the Word may administer the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. This excludes any one else whether he be a Professor of theology, Elder or deacon.

⁸ The January 2003 issue of *Ordained Servant*, and OPC publication, contains several articles defending a three office view; e.g. G I Williamson, *The two and three-office issue reconsidered* (pp5-6), L Wilson, *Ministry of the Word according to the Westminster standards* (pp. 11-16), and *A reader asks; Was it appropriate for New Horizons to advocate the three office view?*” (pp. 1-4). The latter articles, in particular, argue for such a view from the Westminster standards.

However, the insertion of the word 'ordinarily' indicates that there are sometimes extraordinary circumstances which allow a ruling Elder to administer the sacraments but only upon the instruction of the Session of the Church to which he belongs. The sudden illness of a Minister, preventing him from presiding over the Lord's Supper, may require one of the Elders, under the authority of his Session to administer this sacrament.

The first paragraph restates van Dellen and Monsma (p. 216). The second paragraph reflects our Church Order, but fails to provide any justification for this concession either on biblical or historical grounds, or in terms of the practice of the churches. Rather, van Dellen and Monsma note that the Synod of Dort of 1578 held that practice of parties other than ministers administering the sacraments should not be followed by the churches or consistories (ibid.).

2.5. Acts of Synod

The present RCNZ Church Order was adopted by Synod 1977 after many years of discussion. The Acts of Synod 1974 indicate that the question of office, and hence of the proper administrator of the sacraments, was the subject of discussion. In its report to the 1974 Synod, the Church Order Committee proposed the following wording for article 2, taken from the Australian Church Order:

The Offices instituted by the authority of Christ to render services in his church are those of the Minister of the Word, the Elder and the Deacon. These offices differ from each other only in mandate and task.

The present wording of article 2 was adopted on the floor of synod (art. 16, 1974). The 1974 Acts do not provide any further detail concerning the adoption of this article. However the RCNZ Church Order in Concept (1968) already had the concession:

Article 62

The sacraments shall be administered by the authority of the session in a public worship service (ordinarily by a minister of the Word) with the use of the prescribed forms

and provided the following comment:

Combines elements of old art. 58 and 62. Identical with Aust. art. 62, except that we included 'ordinarily' before 'minister' since we found that Scripture does not forbid that elders administer the sacraments in exceptional cases. For the safeguarding of the sacraments is entrusted to the whole session and its uniformity ensured by Synodical forms. We may not — we feel — deprive a church without a minister due to sudden sickness or other unforeseen circumstances, from the Lord's Supper on Sundays that they should ordinarily have it. Thus the implied principle that elders may administer the Sacraments. Scripture records that even Philip, a deacon, baptized. (Acts 8)⁹

Regrettably Synod did not address the apparent mismatch between our confessions and the Church Order.

This potted history of our Church Order indicates that there was a degree of uncertainty on the matter of office, and also as to who might administer the sacraments. The status quo adopted does appear to be out of step with a number of our sister churches, and our confessions.

2.6. Summary

The issue as to who may administer the sacraments is closely tied to the question of the number and nature of office in our churches. Article 57 of our Church Order appears to be inconsistent with two of our confessional standards (WCF and BC), with the Dort Church Order tradition and hence with a number of our sister churches, and to not be based on any clearly stated scriptural argumentation. The issue is, however, of practical significance, affecting the way we worship our Lord.

⁹ Information provided by Pieter van der Wel, Hamilton, by email (1/2/08).

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3. Practical concerns

There are a number of reasons why this matter should be clarified.

3.1. Scriptural Consistency

We confess that a true church (such as we strive to be) maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ (BC29), and that the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited to his own revealed will (WCF XXI:1). It is therefore incumbent upon us to be certain that our practices, in all of life, and also in the context of public worship, conform to his Word.

In the case of the administration of the sacraments, we should strive to justify our practices from Scripture – neither acting contrary to them, nor making rules not required by them.

3.2. Form of Subscription

Related to this is the question of confessional binding. As office bearers *“we sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord, declare by this our subscription that we heartily believe and are persuaded that the whole system of doctrine as taught in the Belgic and Westminster confessions, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort, does fully agree with the Word of God.”*¹⁰ As noted above, two of these confessions unambiguously teach that it is the role of the Minister of the Word to administer the sacraments. The office bearers of our churches have thus bound themselves to this teaching. We struggle to see how the Church Order, at the stroke of a pen, can override this. Conversely, if the Church Order is correct, then the confessions are not, and ought to be changed.

3.3. Pastoral

At a practical level, we recognise the desirability of permitting elders to administer the sacraments, particularly in a situation where there is an acute shortage of ministers. However, without a united statement from our churches that this is biblically and confessionally acceptable, we believe that this practice will create tensions within the churches from those who hold to a three office view.

4. Conclusion

Accordingly, we are hesitant to act on article 57 for both theological and practical reasons. We therefore request Synod to charge the Church Order committee to provide guidance as to whether Article 57 of our Church Order and/or the teaching of our confession (BC30, WCF 27:4) is consistent with the teaching of the Scriptures, and, if necessary, to suggest changes to either to ensure such consistency.

¹⁰ RCNZ Form of Subscription, para. 1.