

Over the course of the past month and a half I have been frequently asked by family, friends, and officebearers about Article 31 of the Church Order. The questions focused on how we are to understand the last part of the article: decisions are to “be considered settled and binding, unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God or with the articles of the Church Order.”

Initially I gave my thoughts, but as the same question kept being asked, I decided for the sake of accuracy and completeness I would ask the Church Order professor (Gritters) and the Church History professor (Dykstra) their judgment on this matter. They provided me with the following, which I found to be very helpful.

Out of love for the church of Jesus Christ, I want to share their answer. And I would encourage all who also appreciate this answer to feel free to share it with whomever they desire.

Rev. Ronald Van Overloop

## **The Proper Understanding of Article 31 of the Church Order**

by Profs. Dykstra and Gritters

A recent issue of “Sword and Shield” attempts to justify the position that it is lawful to criticize and even condemn decisions of the broader assemblies rather than to protest them. This attempt uses the example of our fathers in 1924. Their plea to the PRC reader is: “Remember your history.” However, this use of the history of 1924 to justify such actions is wrong on two counts. First, it is a partial, and therefore, inaccurate recounting of the history. Second, it is a wrong interpretation of Article 31 of the Church Order.

### **The history of 1924.**

These are the facts. In 1924, the CRC adopted the three points of common grace. Subsequently, the Revs. Danhof, Hoeksema, and Ophoff criticized the three points in their preaching and writing.

How can this be explained? In his explanation in the churches’ history (*The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*), Hoeksema does not appeal to an interpretation of Article 31 as a justification for their actions. Rather, he is at pains to demonstrate that the writing against the three points was permitted by the decisions of the 1924 Synod. What follows is HH’s explanation. First, both Herman Hoeksema and Henry Danhof informed the Synod of 1924 that they intended to oppose the three points in their teaching, preaching and writing. The committee of pre-advice at synod advised the synod to warn Hoeksema and Danhof against this, and to threaten discipline if they did so. The synod did not adopt that advice (*The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, 77-79). Second, the synod encouraged the ministers in the CRC to write and speak on the doctrine of common grace (94, 95). Third, the only admonition that the synod gave Hoeksema and Danhof was that they must “abide in their teaching and writing by the standpoint of our Confession regarding the three points” (88).

Herman Hoeksema quotes another man’s summary of their position: “...synod had left the two ministers at liberty to preach and teach and propagate their views with respect to the

common grace question.” HH adds: “which was undoubtedly correct” (p. 102). The point is, the actions and decisions of synod of 1924 meant that the three men could legitimately write, teach, and preach against common grace without violating Article 31.

In light of that history, it was completely improper for the Classes of the CRC then to use Article 31 to discipline the three ministers. That is also the main point of Hoeksema and Ophoff reflecting on that era.

It should also be obvious that the 1924 Synod decision to adopt the three points of common grace is no ordinary decision of a synod. The three points contradicted four Heads of the Canons – double predestination, particular atonement, total depravity, and sovereign, particular grace, as well as the Canons’ teaching on preaching. The three ministers would not be able to preach without contradicting the three points. They indeed had no choice. And the Synod of 1924 had left that open.

### **The Church Order, Article 31**

The wrong interpretation of Article 31 says: “So long as a man has convinced himself that a decision is contrary to the Word of God, the Confessions, or the Church Order, he is not bound by the decision, and is free to speak out against the decision.”

A defense of this erroneous position uses the late Rev. George Ophoff’s interpretation of Article 31. Ophoff believed that a decision is not binding on a minister when the minister himself is convinced that the decision is unbiblical. But this use of Ophoff is mistaken in four points. First, however, it is to be noted that Ophoff emphasized that when a man has “proved to himself” that a decision is wrong, his “solemn duty... is to try to make this plain to the churches—next Classis or Synod” (SB, v. 30, p. 273). This indicates that Ophoff would not have put up with anyone agitating without protesting.

Second, Ophoff’s view was not universally held in the PRCA even in his own day. Two years after Ophoff wrote that (above), Cornelius Hanks gave his view, suggesting that a supplement to Article 31 could read: “The appellant must present his appeal with proof to the next major assembly, and while his appeal is pending he must submit to the decision of the minor assembly.” (SB, v. 32, p. 163).

Third, an appeal to Ophoff’s earlier writings fails to acknowledge that this was the view of the Liberated churches, and not the PRCA. The Liberated always identified themselves by their unique view of Article 31, calling themselves “Liberated according to Article 31 of the Church Order.” Our interaction with the Liberated in the ‘40s and ‘50s led the PRCA to distinguish clearly our view from the Liberated view.

Fourth, and most importantly, appealing to Ophoff to justify a Liberated view of Article 31 is illegitimate because the PRCA have an official interpretation of the article. There can be no question about the PRC’s official view of Article 31. In 2004, synod adopted the document, “Explanation of the rules for Protests, Appeals, and Overtures.” II. B. 5, states: *Article 31 declares that whatever is decided by a major assembly by majority vote, relative to an appeal,*

*must be considered settled and binding—'unless it be proved to conflict with the Word of God or with the articles of the Church Order.'* The implication here is that one may indeed attempt to demonstrate to an ecclesiastical assembly that its decision conflicts with the Word of God or the Church Order, but during the process of protest and appeal, he must submit to the decision by which he is aggrieved.

This clearly demonstrates that someone who is opposed to a decision of an ecclesiastical body: a) Must protest or appeal, and b) must submit to the decision, and c) must not publicly write or speak against a decision.

The adoption of this statement in 2004 was not surprising to anyone and has never (until recently) been contradicted in our circles, because it is what our PRC seminary has taught for the last 50 years. The PRCA still teaches this. We remind elders to re-read the editorial in the Standard Bearer, August 1, 2020, where this position is explained and defended. For your help, here, we quote from Professors Hanks and Engelsma to show the PRC's view has been that criticizing the decisions of synod is wrong:

Professor Hanks: "By 'settled' is meant that the matter is no longer a proper subject for discussion and debate... [it means] that any agitation and propaganda against the decision is improper in the church.... To assume any other position would lead to anarchy and chaos in the church.... [H]e will not militate against it publicly. There are, for a man of integrity, two possible courses of action. **One thing he may not do is make propaganda for his position publicly and privately within the churches.** Article 31 is explicit on the point. All decisions must be considered settled and binding. That is, the matters which prompted the decisions are finished, and the decisions themselves are binding upon all. A man who disagrees with certain decisions retains the liberty of his conscience by holding his inward convictions, but he must keep the matter to himself and may not do anything which would give the impression that he is acting contrary to them.... **[H]e never agitates against synodical decisions...** If a believer discovers that the church which he loves is threatened by a decision taken by an assembly, he must seek to correct that error. If he considers the matter so wrong that he feels compelled to talk with other of his fellow saints about it, it is important enough to protest.... He cannot stand on the sidelines, bemoaning error to his compatriots, but refusing to do anything about it. **This is irresponsible, and a violation of the ninth commandment**" (Notes on the Church Order (Art. 31) and Believer's Manual, Ch. 2; emphasis added).

Prof. Engelsma: "Consistories and individuals submit to decisions of synod with which they themselves are in disagreement. It is accepted that synod's decisions will be considered settled and binding by all the consistories and by all the members." "Synodical decisions put an end to debate on controversial issues in the churches. There may not be continued agitation against the decisions." "...[A]gitation against synodical decisions (is) radically un-reformed...." It is "sin against the unity of the church." (SB, June 1, 1991)

Finally, we remind everyone that this errant view of article 31 will lead and has led to disorder, even mutiny. The orderly way, which is the Reformed way, for anyone to object to ecclesiastical decisions is by protest and appeal. Agitation is sin.