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Theological perspectives on the Presbyterial church governance system

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This collection, titled 'Theological perspectives on the Presbyterial church governance system', consists of papers that were originally presented at the 2023 Reformed Theological Society (RTS) on the same theme. After receiving feedback during the conference, the presenters reworked their contributions into fully-fledged articles and submitted them to *In Luce Verbi* from where they were subjected to a blind peer-review process.

At this juncture, the theme is highly relevant. Church governance systems are increasingly experiencing difficulties in coming to terms with the phenomenon of denominational fragmentation. Hermeneutic differences, doctrinal disagreements, and cultural wars are polarising many churches and are either leading to schisms or the formation of factions within churches. This poses the theoretical question: Is the Presbyterial church governance system equipped to deal with these challenges, and will it be able to preserve church unity at a time when it is under intense pressure?

Of course, church governance involves more than church polity. It also pertains to the ways in which worship services are conducted, how sacraments are administered, how pastoral issues are dealt with, how the congregation relate to each other, and how missionary work is arranged. For this reason, the collection approaches the topic from different disciplinary angles.

Francois Venter is a constitutional law expert. His contribution focuses on the decision-making processes employed within the Presbyterial church governance system. Venter (2024) draws attention to the 17th-century origins of the Presbyterial church governance system and the rationalist, humanist, and liberalist legal climate that characterised the epoch. According to him, the era's notions of individual self-sufficiency and sovereignty probably had a profound influence on the type of collective decision-making mechanisms that emerged within the Presbyterial system. This influence can be seen in Presbyterial notions of voting and representation, and the taking of decisions based on a majority vote. However, he emphasises that the fields of exegesis and hermeneutics are not exact sciences and that church assemblies are never able to declare with absolute certainty that a resolution conforms to the will of God. It is therefore important that church decisions must always be open to revision.

Koos Vorster (2024) discusses the notion of common accord (*gemeen-akkoord*) and asks whether the Presbyterial system allows church assemblies to excommunicate local congregations when they do not comply with synodal decisions. He argues that current applications within the '*Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika*' (GKSA) of terms such as *common accord* and *excommunication* must be revisited, because they could lead into church schisms, the binding of consciences, and the violation of the rights of office bearers. Vorster posits that the term *common accord* refers to the unity of faith as articulated in the confessions. The church order and synodal decisions do not occupy the same level of importance as the confessions. He also states that the Presbyterial system leaves no room for the excommunication of congregations. In fact, to embrace such a stance would be totally alien to the Presbyterial system which locates the authority of the church in the local congregation.

Oversight of theological training is an important component of church governance. Churches increasingly prefer a training of students at private seminaries who are not affiliated to public universities. The GKSA is no exception. Johannes Smit (2024) ascribes this trend to the re-emergence of 17th-century Reformed Scholastic views on training. However, he warns that 17th-century Reformed orthodoxy does not provide an ideal premise or model for theological training, because of its overly rationalist nature and weak pneumatology. In fact, one of its unintended consequences was unhealthy forms of dogmatism, confessionalism and legal rigidity. Going forward, it might be wise to rekindle the strong pneumatology of 16th-century Reformed thought, both in terms of training and church governance.

Note: Special Collection: Theological perspectives on the Presbyterial church governance system.

Gert Breed's (2024) contribution approaches the theme from a pastoral theological angle. According to him, one of the main reasons for church decline and stagnation is the inability of church members to translate faith into a concrete Christian lifestyle. A vital component of parish ministry is to equip believers to do works. But what does good works entail? After an examination of Ephesians 2:1–10, he concludes that good works emanate from God's work in the believer, and that they serve to proclaim God's grace. Christ's preaching was characterised by an emphasis on good works as signs of faith. There is no faith without good works. Breed reiterates that church members should be guided in doing good works and be encouraged to use every opportunity available to bear the fruit of the Spirit.

The contribution of Naas Ferreira (2024) calls for fundamental shifts in the approaches of churches to mission. He points out that the Western church is facing existential threats. Drawing parallels between the failures of ancient Israel and Western Christianity, Ferreira proceeds to discuss the Old Testament roots of the concept of the *missio Dei* and the ways in which Jesus reinvigorated the concept. Ferreira's contribution concludes with a call for a missiology-driven ecclesiology.

Chaka Mathundela (2024) addresses the Open Declaration's (Openbare Verklaring) importance in promoting unity among Presbyterian Church delegates, recommending that local churches reread it, engage in dialogues, prioritise theological education, celebrate Holy Communion, and use Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) to resolve conflicts.

The various contributions underline the important relation between church and theology. Sound theology serves the edification of the church by forcing the church to do self-reflection and to avoid sectarian and secular pitfalls. At the same time, the church forces theology to keep reason within the bounds of faith, and not to wander of in the direction of secular rationalism. Hopefully this collection will contribute to strengthen ties between church and theology.

Reference

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