


# What are the consequences of *sola scriptura* for a Reformed polity? With reference to the *Dutch Reformed Church Order of 1962*

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In the 16th century, after the so-called Dark Middle Ages, the Reformation in the church in Western Europe aimed at reforming the church with consequences for society. Regarding the church itself, the Reformation aimed at bringing the total service of the church under the Word of God as its norma normans or norm of the norms. This is also true for the governing of the church and church polity.

In the tradition of church polity and order that followed the thought of reformers, such as Bucer and Calvin, in the history of, specifically, the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), scholars and churches came to the conclusion that the principle of *sola scriptura* means that Scripture provides the principles or norms for a church polity.

This does not mean that every article in a church order should indicate the text of the Bible on which it is based. Rather, a church order should – at least – be based on principles derived from the Scripture or norms from outside the Scripture in harmony with the Bible.

**Contribution:** The governing of the church cannot be isolated from society or, for example, from the generally accepted norms for natural justice. The Church order of the DRC of 1962 is an example of a reformed church order.

**Keywords:** *sola scriptura* /by scripture alone; norm of norms; reformation of church polity and church government; way of using the Bible; everything decently and in order.

## Introduction

The notion or doctrine of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) is one of five constants that typified the Reformation of the 16th century in Western Europe and, hence, in other parts of the world (De Jong 1987:155–225; Kuiper 1995:156–246), namely, *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia* (grace alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone), *sola fide* (faith alone) and *solus Deo gloria* (glory to God alone). Martin Luther (1483–1546) (De Jong 1987:156, 170) and John Calvin (1509–1564) (De Jong 1987:188, 195) played a key role in this Reformation (see Kuiper 1995:182–203).<sup>1</sup>

In a nutshell, the Reformation was a reaction to the Roman Catholic's control over the church and society in Western Europe during the so-called Dark Middle Ages (roughly 500–1500) (De Jong 1987:5; Kuiper 1995:61–153). This Reformation led to believers becoming priests for God in both the church and the society (Luther, De Jong 1987:183) – priests who could distinguish between reformation and deformation in the church, with implications for the wider community. It was a spiritual coming of age effected by the triune God through his all-embracing order of salvation in the believers as the members of the church: the intertwinement of call, rebirth, faith, acquittal or justice, repentance, sanctification and perseverance, in that order, in those who are saved. This is an order in which the Word and the Spirit of God – typically Calvin (Strauss 2010:82) – take the initiative through the dispensation of the father through his son Jesus Christ. The Reformation is defined by the *solas*, which equip an individual to live to the glory of the triune God on all levels – the *solus Deo Gloria*.

With the publication of his *Concordia Discordantium Canonum* in 1140–1150, Gratian, professor of law at the University of Bologna, paved the way for canon law as a subject to be distinguished from other theological subjects. He was the father of canon law as an independent science.

1. See the *International Monument of the Reformation* in Geneva, with statues of four well-known reformers who were involved in that city, namely, Guillaume Farel (1489–1565), John Calvin (1509–1564), Theodore Beza (1519–1605) and John Knox (1513–1572). The monument was unveiled in 1909, on the 400th anniversary of Calvin's birth, Kuiper 1995:202 (for the lifetimes of Farel, Calvin, Beza and Knox, see De Jong 1987:187, 195, 194, 214).

**Note:** Special Collection: From timely exegesis to contemporary ecclesiology: Relevant hermeneutics and provocative embodiment of faith in a Corona-defined world – Festschrift for Stephan Joubert, sub-edited by Willem Oliver (University of South Africa).

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In this *Decretum Gratiani* (statements or decrees by Gratian), he pays attention to the following: the sources for this law, the ordination and legal position of ministers with the power of the pope and church officials, and the liturgy and sacraments (Bouwman 1985:34; Kleynhans 1982:9). Gratian was followed by several scholars in canon law. Ultimately, writings with an impact on the time of the Council of Basel in 1431 were included in the *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, which, upon approval and editing by a commission of experts and cardinals, was officially published in 1582. The *Corpus* conveyed Roman Catholic canon law and tradition, papal decrees and the Bible as sources with the standard authority for church law or polity. As far as the key elements are concerned, the *Corpus* would replace the Word of God or *sola scriptura* with canon tradition and papal authority. Van't Spijker calls the *Corpus* a collection of conflicting stipulations. The *Corpus* views the Roman Catholic Church as a political body governed by the pope as a tyrannical monarch, with the characteristics of a *strikt georganiseerde eenheid* (strictly organised entity) or a useful structure as a springboard (Bouwman 1985:36–38; Van't Spijker 1972:5). With the *Corpus Iuris Canonici*, the Roman Catholic canon law would, in its main approach, run the same course as the rest of the Roman Catholic Church. It advocated a life of good deeds and, because of that, salvation by God as compensation – instead of God's grace as the way to a sinner's salvation. The *Corpus* opted for papal decrees that led to the denial of *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide* and *solus Christus*. Jonker mentions that the break between the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformation in the 16th century has 'everything to do' with differences regarding the doctrine of redemption. The Reformation wanted to be consistent in its view on God's salvation by grace and associated with the early Western church's doctrine of the Trinity and Christology, as expressed in the ecumenical confessions of the church (the Apostolicum, Nicea and Athanasius). The soteriology of the Bible and its embedment in the doctrine of the Trinity (Ephesians 1:3–14; Jonker 1994:21; Strauss 2010:81–83) are encapsulated in the triune God, who through his Word and Spirit convinced the sinners, whom he chose for salvation, to believe and hence, and not as a result thereof, to be saved. In its doctrine on the triune God and Christ, the Reformation with its doctrine on redemption, wanted to be a continuation of the holy, general Christian church that confesses the Apostolicum and is against a sectarian predisposition and canonical schism. Jonker points to the *katolieke karakter van die gereformeerde belydenis* (catholic nature of the reformed confession). The Reformation wanted to redress the true church against the false church, also in what it was called in Reformational circles, its polity (Jonker 1994:18; see Dutch Confession of Faith, article 29, NGK Publishers 1982:29).

Unlike Martin Luther (1483–1546) (De Jong 1987:156, 170) and the Lutheran Church (De Jong 1987:195–197; Kuiper 1995:200), reformed reformators such as Calvin, Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) (De Jong 1987:172) and Martin Bucer (1491–1551) (De Jong 1987:160) worked towards a full reformation of church and society. To them, the Reformation

was a comprehensive answer to Roman Catholicism, in which, with the pope as the head and authority, church law rather than *sola scriptura* reigns over life (De Jong 1987:195–197; Van't Spijker 1972:10, 23).

Equipped with the *sola scriptura* as a constant norm church polity also had to be reformed and based on this view.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the reformed believed that the Bible alone or the *sola scriptura* must apply to life as a whole as the *norma normans* (norm of the norms).<sup>3</sup>

As the most prominent canonist of the (Calvinistic) Reformation (Plomp 1967:8; Van't Spijker 1972:9), Bucer viewed church polity as the source of justice for the community of Christ. He calls for a Scripture-based divine law or *ius divinum*. Bucer contends that the tyranny of the pope, with his alleged infallibility, deprives the Bible of its authority and destroys true faith and Christian life. For Bucer, the *Decretum Gratiani* and the *Corpus Iuris Canonici* contain inconsistencies, because they contradict the Word of God and older, purer *canones*. As a result of paucity of erudition in the church of Western Europe in his time, churchmen could not distinguish between true and false *canones*. The Roman Catholic statement that their canon law is divine law and above all else in heaven and earth, even above Scripture, supports the pope's tyranny (Van't Spijker 1972:10–11). The *sola scriptura*, as the basic norm of the Reformation stands by the Word of God as its *norma normans* or comprehensive norm. A non-reformatory canon law could, amongst other things, derail the church onto a hierarchical track.

Against this background, the question arises as to the consequences of *sola scriptura* for a reformed church polity<sup>4</sup> – as it became known in these circles. If this polity cannot be reformed or reformatory without the *sola scriptura*, how does the Bible function in a reformed church polity and government? The author discusses specific exponents in the tradition of the Dutch (the Netherlands) Reformed reformation and weigh their opinions. Before analysing Scripture as the source of church polity and a church order, the author indicates the support for *sola scriptura* as the basic norm in reformed polity.<sup>5</sup> He then examines the first church order of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC in South Africa) in the context of the general synod, Church Order 1962 (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerkorde, NGKO-62), for its dealing with Scripture. Indeed, NGKO-62 lays the foundation for the development of a new church order tradition in the DRC. The drafters of NGKO-62 typify such foundation as Dordt and contemporary (Strauss 2010:13; Vorster 1960:13).

2.Coertzen 1991:ii contends that church order addresses what Scripture teaches on the order for and in the church. Church polity deals with the embodiment of this order in the daily life of the church.

3.Barnard 1981:459 mentions the *allernouste wisselwerking* (closest cooperation) between the public worship on Sundays and public worship of life. For *norma normans*, see Strauss 2010:83.

4.In reformed churches, there are no church laws, but stipulations for an orderly obedience to Scripture.

5.For the terms 'church polity' and 'church government', see Spoelstra 1889.

## Leading canonists of *sola scriptura*

### Bucer

Bucer calls the church a *pneumatische Christokratie* (pneumatic Christocracy). Stated differently, God the father deals with church polity through the Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ, the Head and Mediator of his church. According to Bucer, the church is a Christocracy, because Christ was sent by the father to fulfil his *regiment* (rule) or church government through his Spirit and the offices in the church. The authority of this polity lies with Jesus Christ, Head of the church (Van't Spijker 1972:12).

For Bucer, the church order is essential, as required by the Word of the Lord and, therefore, also of Christ. The right of the community of faith must not be belittled. According to him, the church must be governed according to the divine law or *ius divinum*: this implies that the Bible or the *sola scriptura* must determine the church order. Through his apostles, Christ ordered and instituted the nature and form of both the church service and religion:

... Deze ordening van God en van Christus is tevens zijn recht. Het is *ius divinum* waarvoor alles moet wijken. Zelf wijkt het voor geen schepsel. Dit recht der kerk of van God is zo duidelijk in Gods Woord en de oude canones beschreven, dat niemand er iets redelijks tegenin kan brengen (quoted in Van't Spijker 1972:13). (... This order of God and of Christ is its law. It is the *ius divinum* (divine law) for which everything must make way. It does not make way for any creature. This law of the church or of God is so clearly described in God's Word that nobody can reasonably contradict it)

According to Bucer, the reformed *notae ecclesiae* or the true-to-the-Word ministry of the Word, sacrament and discipline are not only the marks of the true church (Dutch Confession of Faith, article 29, NGK Publishers 1982:29) but also a norm for ministering to the community. Therefore, the ministry of the Word, the sacraments and church discipline must unite and form the core elements of a church order and the church as the body of Christ (Du Plooy 1988:8, 9; Van't Spijker 1972:34–35). Bucer and his kindred spirit Calvin set the foundation for the reformed canon law or church polity (De Jong 1985:118–120). This foundation is strengthened by Calvin's influence on the *Confessio Gallicana* (French, Paris 1959), which followed *goeddeels die ontwerp van Calvyn* (mainly Calvin's design), as well as the Dutch Confession of Faith (1561) that found an example in the *Gallicana*. The French and the Dutch in the reformed tradition maintained these confessions (Polman 1897:108).

According to Bucer, this is about the right of every congregation as a *civitas* of the kingdom of heaven or the body of Christ. Church polity must support and serve the edification of this body. Scripture's stipulations must determine the service of the church. For his time, Bucer shows remarkable insights when he views Scripture-based church stipulations from the *Corpus Iuris Canonici* as well as the *Corpus Iuris Civilis* (body of civil law) as useful for the church. According to him, this is how jurists must approach church polity and church order (Van't Spijker 1972:14).

Indeed, the church is made up of believers who also belong to the society or the rest of God's world. The believers in their interaction with the world form the church as well as society or life in its fullness (Strauss 2018: more about this will be discussed later).

For Bucer, the Bible as the *sola scriptura* is the source of principles for church government. This statement was made explicitly against Rome, and its papal authority and church tradition. Indeed, for Rome the latter is the key, as it were, that opens and weighs Scriptural truths for church polity (Van't Spijker 1972:2). Against this, the influence of Bucer's and Calvin's church polity on the Dutch Reformed approach is indisputable (Spoelstra 1989:16). Van't Spijker writes:

Bucers kerkrechtelijke inzichten, als van een goddelijk kerkrecht, dat bij Calvijn terugkeert en zo in de gereformeerde traditie voortleeft (Van't Spijker 1972:9) (Bucer's church political insights, as from a divine approach to church polity, are traceable to the thought of Calvin and live on in the reformed tradition)

and

[... K]rachtige doorwerking van Bucers gedachten via de theologie van Calvijn. Voorzover er sprake is van Calvijn's invloed op de ontwikkeling van de reformatie in deze landen (die Nederlande of 'the Netherlands'), komt daarin ook tot uitdrukking wat de reformator van Genève had ontvangen van zijn Straatsburgse collega. Sterker en duidelijker dan Bucer zelf had kunnen bewerken zijn de kerklike vormen, die Calvijn schiep ... die ons onder de verplichting stelt te leven ... uit hetzelfde Woord ... waardoor Christus zijn heerschappij uitoefent in zijn kerk. (Van't Spijker 1972:38)

### Calvin

In following Bucer, Calvin points to specific constants in church polity as found in the Bible. He bases these constants exegetically and, therefore, on the divine authority. One can call this the *ius divinum*. According to Calvin, this is about general rules that leave room for new circumstances, because one form of regulations cannot apply to all centuries. It is about the application of regulations by the church with a view to order and respectability. These regulations are applied with love, because love must organise all church matters. If love takes over, the church will be able to distinguish better between what hurts and what edifies. The welfare of the church often requires that old usages be removed and new ones established. The church must not renew for minor reasons, but must seek the relevance of old and new usages of faith for its own welfare and for its spiritual development (Sizoo 1931:230–233). For Calvin, the *ius divinum* entails principles of justice for church functioning, which apply to all ages, contemporarily and with Scripture as the source (Strauss 1989:80).

It is interesting to note that already in his time, Calvin paid attention to specific characteristics. He wants to know whether *religie* (religion) lies in the *hoofdhoek* (headdress) of the woman and whether the decision that she must remain quiet is so *heilig* (holy) that disobedience is the *hoogste zonde* (highest sin). Is there so much divine blessings in

bending one's knees and in interring a body that it cannot at all be avoided? His answer is brief and very clear: *geenzins...* (not at all). According to Calvin, the *gewoonten des lands* (usages of the country), the disposition of the faithful and respectability exert pressure on the church to provide answers to these questions and to institute Scripture-bound usages. Demands for order in the church derive not only from Scripture but also from a feeling for the situation, love and sound or common sense (Sizoo 1931:233). Such issues do not have to clash with scriptural constants for the life of the church.

Earlier, Calvin stated that the triune God who rules the church does not visibly live amongst us to inform us verbally of his will but that he uses people for this purpose. He does not convey his right and honour – his authority – to them, but he does his work through them. He could do so without people, because he does not depend on anyone, but shows his kindness using people. To the faithful, this is a lesson in unpretentiousness: to treat the Word obediently and to convey the Word as the Word of God (Sizoo 1931:54).

In summary, Calvin views the normative authority in the church as the authority of the Word, and thus of Christ (Jonker 1965:10). Authority does not adhere to either the official or the one who fulfils God's instructions; it adheres to the Word that is ministered or communicated (Sizoo 1931:55) – the reformatory *sola scriptura*. In addition, in his authority and besides his Word and Spirit, the Lord uses the love of congregants for the well-being of the church in the circumstances, their disposition for that which honours God and a Christian-oriented sound sense – a sound sense to be reconciled with the spiritually enforcing and direction-giving constants of the Word. The Word and the Spirit revitalise the officials' human capabilities or talents, in order to influence the church into service to the Word of God and, thus, to God himself.

This brings us to authors in the Dutch reformed tradition within and outside the Netherlands who affiliate with the tradition of church polity that has developed in the reformed Netherlands from Bucer's and Calvin's thoughts (Engelhard & Hofman 2001:13; NGK 1957:73–74; Smit 1984:i–ii; Spoelstra 1989:16).

## Bouwman

Bouwman indicates that the reformed churches emphasise the rule of the Word of God in the church. For establishing and governing the church, they use the requirements set out in the Word and an order that harmonises with that of the apostolic church (again reformers as part of the holy, general, non-sectarian Christian church, PS). The Holy Scripture is normative for a person's salvation and for his or her life on earth. Unlike Luther, who saw his way clear to do everything that is not prohibited in the Word, the reformers are concerned with that which God commands in his Word, with everything that is determined by the constants of Scripture (Bouwman 1985:29).

Bouwman views the Word of God as the only and sufficient rule for church polity. On the basis of article 30 of the Dutch Confession of Faith, he points out that the true church must be governed by the *geestelijke politie* (spiritual polity) or a spiritual form of government, which the Lord teaches in his Word and which, as Bouwman deems it important, agrees with article 29 of the *Confessio Gallicana*. Bouwman (1985:29) points to the *oude Gereformeerde kerken* (old reformed churches) of Scotland's (John Knox's followers in the Presbyterian Church) emphasis on the Word as the *norma normans* for governing the church. The *Second Book of Discipline*, as an order for this church, and the *Confessio Scotica* (a confession of faith which John Knox took 4 days to finalise in 1560) use the *notae ecclesiae* as the guiding characteristics of the true church, and contend, like Calvin, that the state authority must care for the true church (De Jong 1985:215–216). These churches' understanding of Scripture as the norm for church polity shows principles with contemporary applications. In every country, where the reformed churches receive state support, a unique historical situation embodies this need.

Bouwman believes that without Christ and his all-determining Word, every action in the church creates an impression of *schijnvertoon* (hypocrisy). Therefore, the convinced reformed disregarded the *Corpus Iuris Canonici* of the Roman Catholic Church. The concepts in the *Corpus* turn the believers into servants or officials of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, instead of those of the only Head of the church, Jesus Christ. Against this, the stipulations of the church order should not obscure the Word as the highest norm for governing the church. Every task of the church must happen in the name of the Lord and in accordance with the Word of God (Bouwman 1985:30).

For Bouwman, the Bible is basically the only source for church polity.

Other matters, such as confessions, liturgical writings, church orders and the writings of canonists, are simply resources or instruments. Church polity and church orders must *gegrond zijn in het Woord van God* (be based on the Word of God) (Bouwman 1985:31). With these words, he omits by implication Calvin's note on the disposition of the faithful, his love and sound knowledge as sources of church polity. For Bouwman, the Word is the only and all-determining source for this. However, as Bouwman uses the Bible for the most basic church polity and other sources as resources, he and Calvin could quite possibly agree with one another.

Upon closer examination, these authors agree on the *sola scriptura*. As the *norma normans* of canon law and church polity, the Bible does not provide a final church order, but it is the determining source (Bucer) for legal principles or constants (Calvin) for the basis of church orders (Bouwman). For all three authors, the *sola scriptura* provides the relevant principles in church polity. It is normative or the source for basic principles. These authors may differ in terminology on specific principles or constants of Scripture as biblical claims

for a church order, but they agree in terms of the *sola scriptura* as a normative constant. More recent reformed exponents of church polity find themselves at home in this instance.

The author of this research study now provides brief opinions on the Bible and a reformed church polity of more recent canonists.

### More recent canonists

Reformed authors point out that there is no complete system of church polity in the Bible (Bavinck 1967:353; Bouwman 1985:50, 324; Pont 1981:9; Smit 1984:60). The Dutch canonist **Nauta** agrees with this. According to Bucer, the church, however, must remain bound to biblical requirements when drawing up a church order. Proposed church orders and Scripture-based principles should not clash. A church order should not obscure, obstruct or replace obedience to, and the full elaboration of, the Bible in the life of the church. There are fundamental principles for church polity and ecclesiastical government in Scripture (*ius constituendum*, see Greijdanus 1946:5; Haitjema 1951:12; Plomp 1967:16; Van der Linde 1965:2, 31), whereas a new church order should be distinguished from already applied regulations (*ius constitutum*) in Scripture. According to Nauta, not all Old Testament applications of principles (not the principles or constants themselves, but the *ius constitutum*) are necessarily relevant to church polity and order nowadays, and Scripture is no codex for church polity (Nauta 1971:16–18).

According to Jansen (1952:8), church order regulations can only be binding when drawn from *de Schrift* or Scripture. Van der Linde (1965:31) mentioned principles that apply for all times and that are deduced from the Bible. Smit links the *ius divinum* to principles of law as conveyed in Scripture. For him, church polity is about re-creation, in which God's law is maintained and his supremacy acknowledged. For the people of the church, church polity applies to a reformed community of faith and justice. The kingdom of heaven establishes itself wherever there is a church (Smit 1984:70–71). Van der Watt puts it simply: the *ius divinum* is that in church polity which corresponds with the Bible. A matter that does not originate from the Bible is not divine law. He calls the Bible the *hoofbron* (main source) of church order principles (Van der Watt 1975:154–156). Coertzen calls the Bible the primary source of church polity, from which Scriptural principles or truths can be derived for church polity (Coertzen 1991:124, 136–141). Engelhard and Hofman contend that the reformed churches do not mention that every detail of their church polity is determined by or drawn from the Scripture. The Bible contains only *general directions* for church polity (Engelhard & Hofman 2001:13).<sup>6</sup>

Towards the end of the 1930s, Brouwer and Noordmans debated on the use of the Bible in church polity and government. Brouwer (sa:90) denied that the Bible guides

6. For this paragraph, see Cilliers 2003:290.

the church into viewing a system of church polity as scriptural. Against this, Noordmans acknowledged that the Bible does not provide a crystal-clear system for a church order, but that the reformed deal with specific, direction-giving principles (Bible axioms or confessed truths) such as the introduction to the covenant law of the God in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5: *Ek is die Here jou God wat jou uit Egipte gelei het...* (I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt). Therefore, my Word is law, and spiritually and physically you should not return to Egypt: *niet meer naar Egipte* (Rome, PS) *terug!* In this regard, he points to the principles for church polity of the reformed, namely, that Christ is the Head of his church, that he rules the church through his Word and Spirit and that no church, congregation or office may rule over another – the anti-hierarchy principle. This debate led to Bronkhorst's well-known thesis *Schrift en kerkorde* (Scripture and church order) (Bronkhorst 1947:11, 153; Strauss 2010:51–55).

Bucer's pneumatic Christocracy and Calvin's sound common sense with a disposition for the situation is confirmed by Noordmans' answer to the question as to why Calvin brought the elder back into the church. According to him, Calvin did not use a linguistic-historical exegesis of the Scripture, but rather mystical necessity coupled with the anti-hierarchic principle – considering Scriptural truths. When Calvin *op het bord de pion van de ouderling trok zette hij daarmee den paus* (from a scriptural point of view) *schaakmat* (Bronkhorst 1947:154). (When Calvin used the elder as the pawn, he checkmated the pope – from a scriptural point of view).

Before discussing a well-founded use of Scripture in reformed church polity and bearing in mind a justifiable hermeneutic of Scripture, it can be mentioned that some of the above-mentioned statements are useful for the topic: what are the consequences of *sola scriptura* for a reformed polity? Based on a reformative understanding of Scripture, reflected in reformed confessions and in continuity with a reformed ecclesiological effort, as reflected in the Dutch Confession of Faith articles 27–37, there is acceptable material for church polity. Indeed, a well-considered common adherence to *sola scriptura* leads to continuity and unity in church polity. This continuity is apparent from a shared appliance of Scriptural requirements for church polity (with revisable reformed confessions of faith as bases and keys for understanding Scripture, Visser 1999:1): the constants of the *sola scriptura* (Pont 1981:9–11; Strauss 1989:91–92).

Current applications must, reformatively and in continuity with the constants of the past, grow on the believers in church in an evolutionary way and not interfere in a revolutionary disruptive way. A similar situation was found around the Reformation itself when it had reformational forerunners

7. Pont 1981:9 rightly contends that there is no '*pasklaar*' (ready made) church order in the New Testament. This, however, does not cancel out the possibility of a scriptural church order. The New Testament does not give a comprehensive, completed example of the organisation of the church, yet it provides clear statements on the body of Christ on earth. These biblical statements are systematically summarised in '*die kerklike belydenis, die bondige samevatting van die essensiële wat die Heilige Skrif ons leer*' (the church confession, the concise summary of the essentials taught to us by the Holy Scripture).

that paved the way for Luther, Calvin and others (De Jong 1987:149, 151, 155).

### Benefits for church polity amongst Dutch-reformed canonists

Bucer concludes that Scripture demands a scriptural order to allow the grace of Christ to take effect in the church or congregation (Van't Spijker 1972:29). Because the authority of Christ is the authority of the Word (Strauss 2010:31), Bucer taught that church polity is about Christ ruling through his Word and Spirit (Jonker 1965:12), and thus, through the officials (Bouwman 1985:29; Coertzen 1991:122–123; Rutgers 1971:12–13; Sizoo 1931:54, 71). The message of the Bible is conveyed via people to people; the requirements of the Bible for church polity – for church ministry – must be conveyed by people to assemblies in church government (Van't Spijker 1972:12–13). In reformed terms, church polity and church authority move away from being ruled by individuals to being ruled by a meeting at which members correct one another anti-hierarchically in the light of this Word. In such meetings, the Word must have the final say (Strauss 2010:47). The questions as to how to gain access to these truths or constants of the Word will be discussed later.

By indicating that the church is a pneumatic Christocracy (see also Bronkhorst 1992:45–46), Bucer calls the dynamic institution of church government a government of the triune God in Christ through the Spirit. Such an institution is led by the Word and the Spirit and is bound thereto by scriptural principles to create a church order that serves the church and its call (Plomp 1992:38–40).<sup>8</sup> In the non-church world, during the time of Bucer, this order was conveyed by the *Corpus Iuris Civilis*, amongst others. According to Bucer, Christ as Head leaves room in his reign for human responsibility, religious coming of age and insight to make the church a scripture-driven religious obligation (Heidelberg Catechism question and answer 21, NG Kerk Publishers 1982:44). Christ leaves room for Scripture-bound love, disposition and sound sense, as mentioned by Calvin.

Bucer points to the order of the church in more detail when he emphasises the three marks of the true church as the Word-bound ministry of the Word, the sacraments and discipline as the main determinants of the church order. For him, the church as a relationship of faith is formed around these three matters that simplify the principles of his ministry of the Word and the order within which he ministers the Word (Van't Spijker 1972:34–35). These marks also entail that the congregation, where the Word, the sacraments and discipline are ministered, is viewed in a reformed way as a complete church. It forms, anti-hierarchically and by means of delegation, meetings in the denomination such as circuits and synods. In such meetings, deputised people must be given an equal opportunity to influence the decisions (Celliers 2003:241, 312; Strauss 1989:4–6).

<sup>8</sup>Plomp talks of a sound canon law as "*dienstrecht*" (justice served). Smit 1984:57 calls a well-founded church order a servant of the proclamation of the Word.

Calvin agrees with Bucer about using the marks of the true church to determine its order. Calvin also suggested other matters.

According to Calvin, Scripture provides constants for church polity, thus leaving space for new forms in new circumstances. These constants guide the principles of the church order, and are necessary and useful for the church as a community of faith (with its confessions of faith as the agreement on their unity of the congregation, Nauta 1971:13) and for church respectability from outside and from inside. The requirements for a church order must be based on the Scripture and be supplemented by measures derived from the circumstances and from the love and insight into faith of the believers – everything in accordance with the requirements of Scripture. People decide on a church order because God uses them as tools out of good favour, like people with other instructions (Sizoo 1931:54, 230–233).

Like Bucer, Calvin upholds the requirements of Scripture for church polity, and thus, creates a Scripture-based space for the believers to embrace in their own time and in context.

In the Dutch Reformed canonical tradition, Bouwman agrees with Bucer and Calvin. For him, Scripture is the only requisite principle for church polity. He links his ideas with the Dutch Confession of Faith of 1561, which recognises the church as an institution of faith with a spiritual way of government. Such a unique disposition also emerges in the DRC order tradition: ecclesiastical meetings address ecclesiastical matters in an ecclesiastical way (Strauss 2010:57–62). Bouwman highlights Bucer's conviction that the three *notae ecclesiae* must determine the direction and scope of the church order (Bouwman 1985:29). True to his statement that Scripture is the only acceptable source of requirements for a church order, he adds resources to Scripture as the only source, such as confessions of faith, liturgical writings, existing church orders and writings by canonists. These can, however, only play a positive role if they are based on the Word (Bouwman 1985:31).

Bouwman also considers Scripture and church order from the perspective of *sola scriptura*, with room for the believers to apply or formulate these. Within these parameters, more recent authors such as Jansen, Nauta, Van der Linde, Smit, Coertzen and Van der Watt, as well as Engelhard and Hofman could also, to a lesser or greater extent, find themselves.

### The use of Scripture in reformed church polity and church government

In line with Jonker, Roberts and Van Zyl (1970:167), two approaches to *sola scriptura* and church polity or church order should be noted. On the one hand, biblicism (or a literal use of the Bible) uses texts as they literally are and not in their historical and literary context, and uses the Bible as a codex for church order: this must and this may not ... Biblicism confronts the church with the problem of conflicting and foreign (biblical and reality foreign)

Scripture statements that can only be harmonised by force. In addition, this approach does not link confession, dogma and reformed church orders. As in liberal theological issues, past and present church opinions, dogmas or decisions are irrelevant.

On the other hand, there is a rigid dogmatism: church doctrine and church confession function as a closed thought system. From this perspective, a reformation of church polity and new church orders is irrelevant because the truth has already been formulated and sanctioned. Church doctrine or an accepted ecclesiological point of view is the final arbiter in church differences and in understanding biblical truths. An example of this includes the pope's declarations of infallibility on ethical and doctrinal issues in *ex cathedra* decrees, as decided at Vaticanum I in 1869–1870 (De Jong 1987:290; Strauss 1989:91).

I will now briefly describe a well-founded use of Scripture in church polity.

The issue of confessions of faith or truths of faith – acknowledgements from the heart – as part of a legitimate *Vorverständnis* or presupposition in the exegetical process must be acknowledged. This contains a confession of Scripture as the Word of God in human language (Coertzen 1991:132): the triune God, and his relationship with man and cosmos and Christ as the Head of the church and cosmos. These elements in the reformed confessions and those of the exegete's *Sitz im Leben* or context of life combine in the exegete's understanding of the text. We all have a *Vorverständnis* – or a position that links it to current confessions – that creates a specific image of God and his Word in the exegete before he starts to analyse it. Thus, the exegete must believe in Scripture as the *norma normans* or norm for life, and in Christ as the Head of church and cosmos. However, in order to arrive at the correct method for exegesis of Scripture, the latter as an external normative factor must also influence, correct and determine these preconceptions of the believer. In order to be exposed to the spiritual or life-influencing text of the Bible, the exegete needs to deal with the text and its message from a grammatical point of view: to read, consider and analyse the text for its message. This is followed by an examination of the text and its potential messages in the historical and grammatical context or, in other words, the constant elements of the text within their context as the constant message in different time periods. Phrased, applied and positivised examples in the text should be discerned from its biblical norms and an understanding of Scripture and its normative approach of the church, the kingdom of God, of man and constants for a church order (Smit 1984:4, 5). These constants lead to a discovery of the standing reformatory characteristics of the true church, as referred to by Bucer and Calvin.

With these insights, Bucer and Calvin are still, up to the present day, making crucial contributions to the theme: What are the consequences of *sola scriptura* for a reformed polity?

In line with the reformers' understanding of the *sola scriptura* and other resources for church polity and church order, the results of this exegetical process must obviously also reveal Calvin's disposition towards man's circumstances, his love in organising church matters and his sound intellect. This leads to a well-founded disposition, a healthy love and a sound insight. Without the influence and primacy of the Word and the *sola scriptura* as the *norma normans*, congregants are being mistaken as, in Luther's words, justified but (still active) sinners (*simul iustus ac peccator*, De Jong 1987:170). Congregants as believers are still inclined to sin. Therefore, the resources mentioned by Bouwman must pass the test of the *sola scriptura* in order to be useful to the church.

### The Dutch reformed church order of 1962 and 1 Corinthians 14:40

Against this background, there is an interesting discovery. NGKO-62 contains only one reference to a biblical text, namely, *Alles moet egter gepas en ordelik geskied* (Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way) (1 Cor 14:40). The first meeting of the General Synod of the DRC accepted NGKO-62 in October 1962<sup>9</sup> (Van der Watt 1975:166) using the translation of the Afrikaans Bible of 1953 based on that of 1933. Therefore, as part of its introduction, NGKO-62 article 2 begins with *Waar die Woord van God eis dat in die gemeente van Christus alles welvoeglik en ordelik toegaan* (where the Word of God requires that everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way), here is the Church Order – NGKO-62 – of the DRC. NGKO-62 then contains stipulations for the DRC, aimed at directing this church in its *lewe en werk* (life and work) *ooreenkomstig die Heilige Skrif en die Belydenis* (in accordance with the Holy Scripture and the Confession) (NGK 1964:2). The stipulations are divided into different chapters, each with its own heading: the offices in the DRC, the governing meetings of the church, the work of the church, church discipline and the relation of the church with the society and other churches.

A few remarks on this wording in NGKO-62 are appropriate.

*Alles welvoeglik en ordelik toegaan* is drawn from the official Afrikaans Bible translation of the time (Afrikaanse Bybel Nuwe Testament 1964:198). This shows that the General Synod takes its task to decide on the translation of the Bible seriously (NGKO article 43, NGK 1964:9) and is responsible for the *amptelike* (official) translation. It also indicates that the General Synod relates this text – considering the context of 1 Corinthians 14 – not only to public worship but also to church life. The Synod thus makes an exegetical choice.

According to the drafters, NGKO-62 as a reformed church order wanted to be the Dordt Church Order of 1619 (DKO-1619) *aangepas by die eise van ons dag* (adapted to the demands of our day) (Vorster 1960:13). The commission that

<sup>9</sup>This Synod decided on the current name of the church, namely, the Dutch Reformed Church. This name does not include the traditional geographical suffix in the names of reformed churches (Van der Watt 1975:164). The Dutch Reformed Church, as a religious institution, did not wish to restrict itself to state-specified boundaries (NGK 1962:39, 135).

drafted NGKO-62 did not draw up a new church order. Instead, it revised the Church Order of 1959 of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Gereformeerde Kerke in Nederland Kerorde, GKNKO-59) for use in the DRC. GKNKO-59 was a DRC order, which, as a church order of its time, wanted to keep its link with the DKO. Consequently, the relationship of NGKO-62 with DKO-1619 is via GKNKO-59 (NGK 1957:73–74). This connection is obvious from many features in NGKO-62: its chapter divisions, some of the words from the DKO-1619 stipulations, as well as the content and significance of certain articles. In NGKO-62 article 2 the description of the stipulations concerning the offices, meetings and other things corresponds, to a great extent, with DKO-1619 article 1 (text in Pont 1981:176).

Unlike the DKO-1619, which does not quote a biblical text (Pont 1981:176–186), NGKO-62 article 2 follows GKNKO-59 article 1, with 1 Corinthians 14:40 as a biblical basis for a comprehensive church order (Nauta 1971:43). This shows that NGKO-62 also considers GKNKO-59's stipulations, meaning that GKNKO-59 and NGKO-62 are in the Dutch Reformed tradition that goes back to Calvin. Calvin links the meaning of 1 Corinthians 14:40 to the *heilige vergadering der gelovigen* (holy meeting of the believers), where everything must happen in a suitable way with *waardigheid* (dignity). According to Calvin, the church must be kept to its order through *zekere banden van gepastheid en matigheid...* (certain ties of suitability and moderation) (Sizoo 1931:229). Jansen (1952:9) associates 1 Corinthians 14:40 with the visible and the invisible church. In their comment on article 1 of the order of the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRCN-KO), an article on the basis of which 1 Corinthians 14:40 also contends *that in the churches all things* (my emphasis, PS) *are to be done decently and in order*, Van Dellen and Monsma mention that the direct context of this text associates the order with public worship in Corinth. They argue that, in his letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul points out various matters in the congregation, which give a general ecclesiastical significance to the order of 1 Corinthians 14:40 (Engelhard & Hofman 2001:19; Van Dellen & Monsma 1967:22). In his clear and well-founded exegesis of the text, Smit (1984:10) concluded that the order affects everything in the church: the meetings in the church *sowel as die kerklike lewe in sy geheel* (as well as church life as a whole).

In his discussion of GKNKO-59, Nauta subscribes to this explanation of 1 Corinthians 14:40 – a case in which GKNKO-59 clearly influences NGKO-62. Nauta asks that everything concerning the *uitwendige inrichting der kerk* (external institution of the church) be weighed against this order. He mentions Calvin who, like Nauta himself, places the *inrichting van de (hele) kerk* (the institution of the (entire) church) under this order.

*De Here heeft daarom de uiterlijke ceremoniën in onze vrijheid gelaten, opdat wij niet zouden gaan denken dat Zijn dienst daarin opgaat. Intussen heeft Hij ons echter niet toegelaten een ongebonden en teugellose willekeur... maar grenzen om ons heen gesteld, of altans de vrijheid welke Hij verleende, zo gematigd, dat het slechts geoorloofd*

*is uit Zijn Woord een oordeel op te maken over wat recht is... in onderskeiding van de tyrannieke verordeningen van de paus ...* (Nauta 1971:10). (The Lord, therefore, left the formalities to us, so that we would not think that His service in full is limited to us. In the meantime, however, He has not allowed us unrestrained arbitrariness, but set boundaries around us, or at least so moderated the freedom He granted us, that we are only allowed, according to His Word, to judge what is right ... This should be decided by us and against the tyranny of the pope)

This leaves us with the option of whether or not the content of the articles of NGKO-62 is based on the Scripture, in the same way as the versified (sections of the Bible with an interpretation by the versifier) or the presumed scriptural content (without sections of the Bible, but with the versifier's broad interpretation of scriptural truths) of hymns or decisions of church meetings do. Articles from NGKO-62 are selected for this purpose. An evaluation of NGKO as a whole and of all its parts as scriptural is beyond the scope of this article. This evaluation concentrates on main issues without discussing the scriptural nature of every stipulation of NGKO-62. The contemporary nature of these stipulations is also apparent.

## The Dutch reformed church order of 1972 and scriptural arguments

The marks or *notae ecclesiae* of the true (reformed) church, as the cornerstones of a church order (as viewed by Bucer and Calvin), play a specific role in NGKO-62. The scriptural nature of the confession of the *notae* will not be addressed in this article. This is officially accepted as a confession, and therefore, acceptable in the Dutch reformed tradition.

About the Word: NGKO-62 gives the official ministry of the Word to competent ministers of the Word whose competency, in this respect, is recognised by church-appointed instances of the DRC. In reformed churches, this competency implies an ability to minister the Word purely and correctly. In support of this, NGKO article 48(d) provides that preaching must be an explanation and application of the *sola scriptura* alone. This statement is brief and pure as far as the reformed churches are concerned. In order to ensure that the reformed confession supplements the pure preaching, the latter must be preached 12 times annually *aan die hand van* (based on) the Heidelberg Catechism (from the Word, PS) (NGK 1964:10).

NGKO-62's stipulations regarding the sacraments as visible ministry of the Word are lean, cautious and, from a reformed and church point of view, apparently indifferent and negligent. There are no provisions for a Word-bound, officially approved ministry of the sacraments. NGKO-62 article 49(a) merely mentions that baptism during public worship be ministered by an unspecified minister of the Word.<sup>10</sup> Without any stipulation with regard to its being as bound to Scripture or confession, holy communion is celebrated in the congregation *minstens* (at least) four times a

<sup>10</sup>'Unspecified' opens the issue to non-reformed, non-official ministers of baptism who pave the way for an unreformed approach to faith. Baptism is, indeed, a true confessional issue.



year, without any stipulation of where and how (NGKO 1964:10).

NGKO-62 provides more details about church discipline. In general, it can be said that NGKO-62, which addresses discipline in an independent chapter of more than two pages, points to church discipline as – according to Scripture and without citing biblical texts – a spiritual and loving activity, typical of the church. For NGKO-62, potential (*openbare ergerlike* or public offensive) sins for the agenda of church assemblies are *properly* investigated for the sake of the credibility of Christ and his church. Such sins occur throughout life and conflict with Scripture-bound activity. From a biblical perspective and without quoting any text, church discipline is aimed at the honour of God, the welfare of the church and the salvation of the sinner. According to NGKO-62, discipline is about the whole life of mankind and related to disobedience to God. Based on the Word, God's comprehensive love and the influence of the reformed confessions, the DRC is deeply aware of the honour of God on all levels – of the *solī Deo gloria*. In addition, Calvin's sound or good sense reassures one that a church does not officially address every transgression, whether it be small or obvious. In that case, there would be no time left for the ministry of the Word.

A weak point in NGKO-62 is that there is no indication of the procedure in a disciplinary case. This is a matter that must also be based on the rules of natural justice. These rules are not unscriptural, but rather just and sensible (see Sadler 1979:51) and an extra-biblical source of church order stipulations. In addition, a thorough examination in a disciplinary case must pray for guidance of the Spirit (Bucer's pneumatic Christocracy!) in order to come to a well-founded finding based on the answers, body language, atmosphere and sensible deductions. The loving father notion of NGKO-62 article 57 is, without text or argument, relevant, typically Calvinistic and biblical (NGK 1964:12–14).

Although NGKO-62 does not quote anything from the Bible in this section, its stipulations on church discipline are full of inferred biblical-Christian principles.

A final word must be given on NGKO-62's handling of the relationship between the DRC and the state. NGKO-62 argues from a non-biblical, but not unbiblical, philosophically grounded point of view (a source for a sound church polity) on the nature of the church as against the nature of the state. In the early 1960s and shortly after the crisis of Sharpville, the DRC in its church order felt obliged towards the South African government of that time to convey its moral support officially yet indirectly, as this was something that would not have been appropriate coming from a spiritually independent church. The DRC would not make statements that would undermine the authority of the state or cause disorder in the sphere of public law without an enquiry in governmental affairs (NGK 1964:14–15).

## Conclusion

Although NGKO-62 strongly indicates its affinity for *sola scriptura*, this is not the case in its stipulations for the life of the DRC. Dutch Reformed Church canonists pride themselves on the fact that the Bible is their primary or only source – the *sola scriptura* – of principles for the church order. Meanwhile, their first NGKO, NGKO-62 as precursor to NGKO-2015, is an example, in which non-biblical sources are used and Scripture-founded marks are not clear or obvious. 1 Corinthians 14:40 is the only Bible text quoted by NGKO-62 (Strauss 2018). With the acceptance of NGKO-62, more than one non-biblical (not unbiblical) source was relied upon: the competence of the commission that had to prepare the new church order and the unfamiliarity of the synod with the church orders have to be taken into account. This is why the authoritative submission and apparently easy acceptance and maintenance of the gist of NGKO have taken place since then (*Die Volksblad* 12:10:1962:1; 13:10:1962:1; Van der Watt 1975:164).

In the meantime, NGKO-62 is, to a large extent, an example of a church order in which the Bible and biblical principles have the greatest say. For this reason, and 50 years later, elements of the gist thereof are still an important part of the current, valid NGKO (NGKO-2015:1).

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