

A detailed photograph of a Gothic cathedral, likely Reims Cathedral, showing its intricate facade with a large rose window, flying buttresses, and multiple levels of arches. The sky is blue with some clouds.

**God Protects His People as
They Await Their Rest:
Church Censures and
Church Councils**



Church Censures (WCF 30)

Starting Points:

1. Christ is King & Head of the Church (WCF 30.1)

- a. There is here a Repetition From Chapter 25 “Of the Church”
- b. But a Different Focus: Chapter 25 addresses the question, How should we think about this Bride of Christ?

How does it connect to God’s eternal decrees? Are all that profess Christ members of the Church? Is the church limited to one nation? Is it limited in time? Is it always perfect? Will it ever be perfect? How do I make sense of all the different churches? Are they all true or are they all a lie?

- c. Chapters 30 and 31 focus on **HOW Christ Rules and Reigns as King in His Church**. The Question here is Church Government.

Church Censures (WCF 30)

Starting Points:

2. The members of the Westminster Assembly **disagreed** on the proper structure of Church Government. A small number were Anglican, some were Congregationalists, and most were Presbyterian. Chapter 31 will tell us which one of those three positions the assembly ultimately affirms.
3. Chapter 30 focuses not on those differences, but upon that on which they agreed: **Christ rules the church through officers that He appoints. Those officers exercise that rule by the means that Christ instituted and to the end of the good of those who belong to Christ and ultimately to His Glory.**

Church Censures (WCF 30)

Church Officers:

1. “The Lord Jesus, as King and Head of his church, hath therein appointed a government, **in the hand of church officers**, distinct from the civil magistrate.” – **WCF 30.1**

Key Points:

- The idea that God creates authorities to rule by serving runs throughout the Scriptures. When the rulers appointed by God to rule do so without serving, God rebukes/disciplines the rulers.
- The New Testament regularly refers to “elders” or “overseers/bishops” as those who are called and appointed to serve the church by ruling. Acts 20:17-28; I Tim 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; Heb. 13:7-24.
- This office is an ecclesiastical office, not a civil (common community) office. The officers are ecclesiastical officers, not civil ones.

Church Censures (WCF 30)

The Authority of the Officers and the Means of Their Rule:

2. “To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed; by virtue whereof, they have power, respectively, to retain, and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word, and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the gospel; and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require.”—
WCF 30.2

Key Points:

- These Officers are given by Christ the “keys of the kingdom of heaven.” Matt. 16:13-19; Matt. 18:17-18; John 20:23. Christ first gave this authority to his disciples and in them to the elders/overseers who govern/rule His Church.

Church Censures (WCF 30)

Key Points cont'd:

- The “keys” refer to the authority and responsibility to “guide the body of Christ in determining whether someone is to be treated [by the church] as a brother/sister, an erring brother/sister, or as [on outside of Christ].
VanDixhorn, pp. 403-404
- The “means” to be used are the “Word” and “Censures.”
 - The reading, the preaching, and the teaching of the Word is the regular and common way that Christ, through the officers, governs and cares for His people. The Word convicts and corrects; it also exhorts, encourages, and confirms.
 - “As occasion requires” Christ will rule over His people, through the officers, by means of a **censure** – a formal act of discipline directed to a particular individual or group of individuals.

What are these Censures? - WCF 30.4

4. “. . . , the officers of the church are to proceed by admonition; suspension from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for a season; and by excommunication from the church; according to the nature of the crime, and demerit of the person.” – **WCF 30.4**

Key Points:

- These three acts of formal discipline are applicable to **members and officers alike**. As the Word is to be applied equally to all, so the censures are to be applied equally to all. (*See, PCA Book of Church Order, Chap. 30. for additional censures for officer holders.*)
- The decision regarding the severity of the censure is to be made in light of the nature of the wrong, the fault of the person, and the response by the person to correction.

The Purposes of the Censures - WCF 30.3

3. Church censures are necessary, for the [1] reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren, for [2] the deterring of others from the like offenses, for [3] purging out of that leaven which might infect the whole lump, for [4] vindicating the honor of Christ, and the holy profession of the gospel, and for [5] preventing the wrath of God, which might justly fall upon the church, if they should suffer his covenant, and the seals thereof, to be profaned by notorious and obstinate offenders. **WCF 30.3**

Key Points:

- Censures are to be used. They are understood to be **necessary** when an “occasion requires” it.

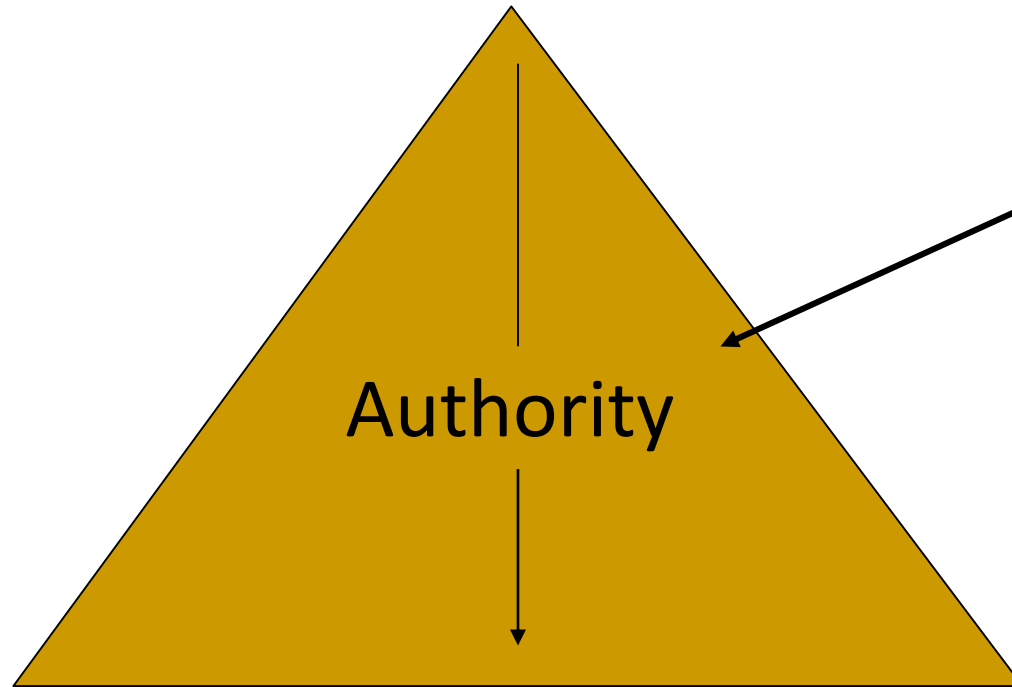
The Purposes of Censures - WCF 30.3

Key Points Cont'd:

- The Scriptures indicate that censures are to serve multiple purposes. In listing the various purposes, the divines are careful to be faithful to the Bible's instruction on censures. And, consistent with Chapter 1 (Of Holy Scripture) they list all the purposes that the New Testament provides for the use of censures. The Westminster Divines refuse to reduce the purposes of censures to a single, central or exclusive purpose, e.g., the purpose of every censure is not just a "rescue mission."
- When officers use censures, they must keep in mind all of these purposes. Without that careful and prayerful consideration, the censure will likely be either too harsh or too light.

Church Councils (31)

Christ is King & Head of the Church



Officers Serving by Ruling
in Local Congregations

This is the disputed space:

1. How does Christ's Authority end up residing in the officers who are overseeing the local congregations?
2. Is the authority of the local officers subject to review by others or is it final?

How does Christ's authority come to reside in officers of a local congregation? Are decisions by those local officers final? The Choices:

- 1. Indirect and Hierarchical** (Catholic, Episcopal, Anglican, Methodist)-
Christ delegates authority to one or more Bishops as His representative(s) on Earth. The Bishop then, in a hierarchical structure, delegates limited authority to others who are more locally located. All the decisions of the lower clergy are reviewable by those who hold a higher rank.
- 2. Direct, Representative, but not Formally Connected**
(Congregationalist/Baptist) – Christ appoints, by selection of the congregation of officers, one or more officers (elders/deacons) to exercise authority in a local congregation. The decisions made by those officers are final unless the congregation alters them by vote. Churches may organize in an association to share common ministry objectives, but those associations do not review decisions.

How does Christ's authority come to reside in officers of a local congregation? Are decisions by those local officers final?

3. Direct, Representative and Connected (Presbyterian, Christian Reformed Church, United Reformed Church) – Christ appoints officers (elders) in each church. Those officers are identified by the members of the congregation through the work of the Holy Spirit and in accordance with the biblical requirements (I Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). They are charged with the spiritual well-being of the church, Representative elders from the local churches within a region gather at times of their choosing (1) to determine controversies of faith; (2) set rules and directions for matters that are for the common good of the whole church, and (3) to review the actions of the officers of the local churches to determine whether those actions are consistent with Scripture and the rules adopted by the denomination for its good order.

WCF Chapter 31 - Despite disagreements, Chapter 31 takes the Position that the **Third Option** is the one that best represents Scripture and comports with the Light of Nature, Christian Prudence, and the General Rules of the Word (WCF 1.6). See WCF 31.1 and 31.2 below.

WCF 31.1 - “For the better government, and further edification of the church, **there ought** to be such assemblies as are commonly called synods or councils: and **it belongeth to the overseers and other rulers of the particular churches, by virtue of their office, and the power which Christ hath given them for edification and not for destruction, to appoint such assemblies;** and to convene together in them, as often as they shall judge it expedient for the good of the church.”

WCF 31.2 – “It belongeth to synods and councils, **ministerially** to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of his church; to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same: . . .”

Note: The authority of any council **CAN NEVER** exceed the authority held by the officers of the church under Christ as King and Head of the Church. Because Christ is the Magistrate of the Church, officers of the Church, as undershepherds of Christ, have only **declarative** and **ministerial** authority. They do not, individually or collectively, have authority to bind anyone’s conscience by a law that is not in the Word of God. (See WCF, Chapter 20, Of Christian Liberty . . .)

What Authority Do Councils Have?

WCF 31.2 – “. . . [their] decrees and determinations, **if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made,** as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in his Word.”

WCF 31.3 - “All synods or councils, since the Apostles' times, whether general or particular, **may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both.**”

WCF 31.4 – “Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in **cases extraordinary;** or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.”

Back to Our Beginning: Considering Creeds and Confessions¹

Why Should We Give Attention to Proclamations of Councils?

- A. They are Useful Summaries of the Teaching of Scripture on Key Points.
- B. They are Intended to do Two Things:
 1. To Assist the Church in instructing the saints in the Faith (and are efficient in doing so).
 2. To Unite the Church in Communal Praise – to remind us of Who our God is, What He has done, What He is doing, and What He will do so that we can Praise Him in Unison.

¹ See Carl Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative*