

## Why are Ecclesiastical Feast Days in the Reformed Church Order?

By R. D. Anderson

The church orders of modern Reformed church federations around the world generally go back in principle to the order ratified by the Synod of Dort in 1618/19. In the line of Dort, they usually contain some reference to the observance of “ecclesiastical feast days.” As an example, allow me to quote from article 65 of the church order of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia:

**ARTICLE 65: Ecclesiastical feast days**

On Christmas Day, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Ascension Day, and at Pentecost the consistory shall call the congregation together for church services. The sacred events which the congregation commemorates in particular on these days shall therein be proclaimed.

A church order is a list of agreements which the churches make in common so that they can better give each other mutual support and discipline. But if this is the case, why do they usually contain an article on church services at feast days, days which are not specifically commanded in Scripture, but on which there is a long standing tradition of celebration? Additionally, 1. do churches really need to bind each other to such days, and 2. was that really the original intention of this church order article?

In the following, I would briefly like to review the history that led to the formulation of this church order article at the time of the Reformation in the Lowlands. We need to bear in mind that the Reformed churches organised themselves in a united federation which expressed itself nationally in the national synod. The churches in each province of the Lowlands also came together in provincial synods (see the map on the next page). The region of the largest province, that of Holland, was divided into two “particular” synodical regions of North and South.

1573–1619

Already in 1573 we see the topic coming to the floor of

the Particular Synod of North Holland, that year held in Enkhuizen.

**1573 Particular Synod of North Holland<sup>1</sup>**

Also decided in respect of feast days, that in common no feast days are to be held other than Easter (Sunday) and the day thereafter, Pentecost (Sunday) and the day thereafter, Christmas, and similarly New Year’s day and Ascension day.

The churches in South Holland were somewhat stricter. A year later their Synod gathered in Dordrecht, making the following pronouncement:

**1574 Particular Synod of South Holland<sup>2</sup>**

Respecting the feast days which are in addition to the Sunday: it has been decided to rest content only with the Sunday. Nevertheless, the normal material relating

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1. 9. “Is oock besloten aengaende die vierdaegen, dat men eendrachtelyck ende anders niet onderhouden zal dan Paesschendach ende daechs daernae, Pincxterdach ende daechs daernae, Christi geboortedach, desgelycx Nyeuwejaersdach ende Hemelvaertsdach.” *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden, gehouden in de noordelijke Nederlanden gedurende de jaren 1572–1620*, 8 vols., verzameld en uitgegeven door Dr. J. Reitsma en Dr. S.D. van Veen (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1892–1899) 1.17. All translations into English are my own.

2. 53. “Aengaende de feestdaghen neffens den Sondach is besloten, dat men met den Sondach alleen tevreden syn sal. Doch sal men de ghewoonlicke materie van der gheboorte Christi Sondaechs voor den Christdach in der kercke handelen ende het volck van de afdoeninghe deses feestdachs vermanen ende oock van derselve materie op den Christdach predicken, soo hij valt op een predickdach. Men sal oock op Paesch ende Pincxterdach van der verrijnsisse Christi ende seijdinghe des H. Gheestes leeren mueghen, twelck in de vrijheijt der dienaren staen sal.” *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, 2.134.



Republic of the Seven United Netherlands in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (1715–1785) showing provincial boundaries. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

to the birth of Christ shall be handled on the Sunday before Christmas day together with an admonition to the people not to observe Christmas day. If Christmas day falls on a Sunday, the same material shall be preached on that day. It is also permitted to preach on the resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Easter Sunday and Pentecost Sunday, the which is left to the freedom of the ministers.

This seems clear enough. Behind the scenes, however, there was a political battle going on between the Roman Catholic forces and the Protestants. The Dutch war for independence from Roman Catholic Spain had begun in 1568, and would last until 1648 (known as the Eighty Years' War). The celebration of these extra days came right in the middle of this conflict. The Reformed churches needed to be careful to steer a righteous course between

all manner of Roman Catholic superstitions, which had become associated with these days, and an overzealous extremism which could easily lead to political riots.<sup>3</sup> We see that reflected in the decision of the Particular Synod of South Holland held in Rotterdam a year later:

#### 1575 Particular Synod of South Holland<sup>4</sup>

As much as concerns feast days: The government shall be petitioned that they allow everyone to open his shop and to work six days in accordance with the fourth commandment of our Lord. And if the government desires to ordain any others besides the Sunday, the delegated ministers will petition parliament that they inform them in such a way that they may consider how much and how far one can permit in this matter, so that on the one hand people do not fall into superstition as warned by Paul in Gal. 4, and on the other hand that people will not be led to fight too fiercely against the aforesaid government because of certain feast days.

Three years later, a national synod was finally able to be held in Dordrecht. By this time it was slowly becoming clear that the political will to be rid of these extra feast days was weak. On 12 July 1578 the government made a “declaration of religious freedom” in which the various Roman Catholic feast days were made compulsory for protestants. The synod in its response attempted to minimise the damage by steering the churches away from any special ways of celebrating these feast days, and by keeping them as “normal” days.

#### 1578 National Synod of Dort<sup>5</sup>

It was indeed to be desired that the freedom from God to work six days be permitted in the church, and that only the Sunday be celebrated. Nevertheless since certain other feast days are maintained by authority of the government, namely, Christmas day and the day thereafter, likewise the day after Easter and the day after Pentecost and in some places new years day and ascension day, the ministers shall do their best to teach the congregation to transform unproductive and harmful idleness into a holy and profitable exercise by sermons in which they particularly deal with the birth and resurrection of Christ, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and such-like articles of the faith. The ministers of churches in those cities where yet more feast days are observed by authority of the government shall do likewise. In the meantime all the churches shall work to make the use of all feast days except Christmas day (since Easter and Pentecost fall on Sunday) as normal as possible, and as soon as is fitting to abolish them.

It is interesting to note how close the decision of this synod was to the position of John Calvin, when confronted (among other things) with the reimposition of certain feast days by the magistrates of Geneva in 1538 and again (during his second tenure in Geneva) in 1544. Calvin had argued that these days could be tolerated if they were not turned into pseudo-sabbath days, so that after the morning service the people could be free to return to work.<sup>6</sup>

The attempts of Dutch churches to diminish the significance of the feast days in the hope of abolishing them altogether in due time, however, were to little avail. By 1581 the goals of the churches had been reduced. It did not any longer seem possible to be rid of *all* the extra feast days. Their goals were now modified towards working for a minimal list.<sup>7</sup> The churches in Zeeland

3. The first fifty years of this war involved only Spain and the Netherlands (1568–1618), but this exploded during the last thirty years to envelop most of Europe, known as the Thirty Years’ War.

4. 12. “Soeveel als die veeſtdagen angaet, men ſal die owerheyt bidden, dat ſij ſes dagen nae des Heeren 4 gebot eenen ijegelicken toelaeten ſynen winckel te openen ende te wercken. Ende ſoe die owerheyt enige andere ordoneren wilde behalven de Sondach, ſullen die gecommiteerde miniſters den Staten bidden, dat ſe hun ſulcx willen te kennen gheven, opdat deſelve miniſters bedencken mogen, hoeveel ende verre men hierinne ſal toelaeten, opdat men ter ener ſyden in gheen ſuperſtitien en verfaile, als Paulus den Gal. 4 waerſchout, noch ter ander ſijde om enigen veeſtdagen tegen de vorſz. owerheyt te hart ſtrijden.” *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, 2.169.

5. 75 (cap. 4, 23) “Het ware wel te wensſchen dat de vryheyt van ſes daghen te aerbeyden van God toeghelaten in der Kercke ghehouden ende de Sondagh alleen ghevyert mocht worden. Nochtans dewyle ſomighe andere feeſtdaghen door autoriteyt der Ouerheyt onderhouden werden, te weten den Chriſtdagh metten navolghenden dagh, item den tweeden Paeschdagh ende tweede Pynxterdagh ende in ſomighe plaetsen den iaersdagh ende hemelvaerts dagh, ſoo ſullen de Dienaers neerſticheyt doen datſe met predicatien in den welcken ſy in ſonderheyt van de gheboorte ende verrysenisse Chriſti ſeydinghe des H. Geeſtes ende derghelycke artykelen des gheloofs, de ghemeynte leeren ſullen den onnutten ende ſchadelicken ledichganck in een heyliche ende profytelicke oeffeninghe veranderen. Het ſelfde ſullen de Kerckendienaren in dien Steden doen daer meer Feeſtdaghen door de autoriteyt der Ouericheyt onderhouden worden. Hierentusſchen ſullen alle Kercken aerbeyden, dat het ghewoonlick ghebruyck aller feeſtdaghen behaluen den Chriſtdagh (dewyle Paesschen ende Pynxteren op den Sondagh koemen) ſoo vele moghelic is, ende op het aldervoeghelickſte affghedaen werden.” *Acta van de Nederlandsche Synoden der zestiende eeuw*, edited by F. L. Rutgers (Dordrecht: J. P. Van den Tol, 1889, repr. 1980), 252–53.

6. See Chris Coldwell, “In Translatione: John Calvin’s Letters to the Ministers of Montbéliard (1543–1544): The Geneva Reformer’s Advice and Views of the Liturgical Calendar,” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 13 (2017): 202, 206–207.

7. It should be noted, however, that the Acts of this synod had still not reached the rural regions of Gelderland by 1581 as noted in the Acts of the Provincial Synod of Gelderland held in Arnhem, 1581. See *Acta*, Reitsma and van Veen, 4p.17 (art. 8).

formulated this list at their Provincial Synod meeting in Vlissingen, February 1581 as follows:

#### 1581 Provincial Synod of Zeeland<sup>8</sup>

Concerning the feast days it has been decided, that in all of Zeeland there shall be a united custom to preach on Christmas day, Easter (Sun)day, Pentecost (Sun)day together with the day following, and not on any other feast day anymore.

Later that year the National Synod met and decided,

#### 1581 National Synod of Middelburg<sup>9</sup>

The congregations shall remonstrate their governments that the feast days, except the Sunday, Christmas day and ascension day be abolished. But in the places where more feast days are held by order of the government, the ministers shall work by means of sermons to transform the unproductive and harmful idleness into a holy and profitable exercise.

8. 10. "Aengaende de feestdaghen is verordent, dat men in geheel Zeelandt eenderley gebruyck houden sal om te prediken op den Christdach, Paesdach, Pinxterdach met den navolgenden dach eens, ende op geen ander feestdaghen meer." *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, 5.7.

9. 50. "De Ghemeijnten sullen bij haren Ouericheden aenhouden dat de feestdaghen, vutghenomsn (*sic.*) den Sondach Christdach ende hemelvaertsdach, afghedaen werden. Maer ter plaetse daer meer feestdaghen door beuel der Ouericheijt ghehouden werden, sullen de Dienaers arbeijden datse met predicken den onnutten ende schadelicken ledichganck in een heijliche ende nutte oeffeninghe veranderen." *Acta*, Rutgers, p. 394 (art. 50).

10. *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, 2.246 (sitting 18th June) and 4.29 (art. 18).

11. *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, 3.10 (art. 22).

12. 60. "De Ghemejnten sullen onderhouden, benefens den Sondagh, Christ-dagh, Paesschen ende Pinxsteren: Maer ter plaetsen daer meer Feest-dagen, door bevel der Overheden ghehouden werden, tot ghedaghtnisse der weldaden Christi (als de besnijdenisse Christi ende Hemelvaerts-dagh) sullen de Dienaers arbeijden dat sy met Predicken den ledigh-ganck des volcx in een Heylige ende nutte oeffeninghe veranderen." *Acta*, Rutgers, 501.

13. *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, 2.308 (art. 60), 2.399 (art.25) and 3.68 (art. 16), 3.88 (art. 20), 3.108 (art. 13) 3.323 (gravamina art.31).

14. *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, 1.223 (art. 37).

15. Both the Provincial Synod of Zeeland 1591 meeting in Middelburg and that of Friesland meeting in Sneek 1593 simply stated this reduced list or referred to the National Synod without seeing the need for any reprimand or encouragement to remonstrate local government. In Friesland, however, the Provincial Synod meeting in Bolsward 1608 directed the churches to be unified in preaching on Ascension day. *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, 5.26 (art. 56) and 6.75 (art. 6) 6.177 (art. 3).

16. *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, 4.77 (art. 22).

17. *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, 8.57 (art. 16).

18. *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, 7.242–43 (art. 12).

We see evidence of the outworking of this attempt to reduce the number of feast days in 1583, both in the Provincial Synod of South Holland held in 's-Gravenhage, where the churches were again directed to remonstrate the government, as well as the Provincial Synod of Gelderland which admonished those churches, where "the feast days of the papists" were still held, to cease and conform to the National Synod of 1581.<sup>10</sup> In 1593 the Provincial Synod meeting in Briel had to admit that no progress had been made, but nevertheless directed the deputies to continue as there was occasion.<sup>11</sup> Such remonstrations, however, seemed to have had decidedly little effect and by 1586 this direction was tacitly dropped:

#### 1586 National Synod of 's-Gravenhage<sup>12</sup>

The congregations shall observe in addition to the Sunday, Christmas day, Easter [Sunday] and Pentecost [Sunday]: but in the places where more feast days are held by order of the government in memory of the benefits of Christ (such as the circumcision of Christ and Ascension day), the ministers shall work so that by means of sermons the idleness of the people may be transformed into a holy and profitable exercise.

This resignation, however, did not stop the Provincial Synods of South Holland held in Delft 1587, 's-Gravenhage 1591, Delft 1596, Schoonhoven 1597, Dordrecht 1598, and Delft 1616 from remonstrating the government again and again on this point.<sup>13</sup> In North Holland, the churches were able to be satisfied that their goal had been reached.<sup>14</sup> In both Zeeland and Friesland this reduced list was also promulgated and appears to have been heeded without much problem.<sup>15</sup> In Gelderland the Provincial Synod was still struggling with the issue in 1599 and directed that the publication or celebration of "Papist feast days" was to be punished.<sup>16</sup> In Drente the Provincial Synod of 1603 (held in Beilen) ordered the churches to stick to the church order on this matter, adding that those who contravene the rule be seriously admonished.<sup>17</sup> In Groningen the Provincial Synod of 1614 (held in Appingedam) was also becoming more serious in its attempt to induce conformity. The synod ordered that there be uniformity in the celebration of feast days and that those churches which did not conform (that is, those churches which observed *more* feast days than listed by the national synod) were to be severely censured by the classis and non-conformance was to be reported to the next Provincial Synod.<sup>18</sup>

It was not only additional days for celebrating Christ's circumcision or ascension which caused some degree

of turmoil. The celebration of Good Friday became a contentious issue too. The first we read of Good Friday is in 1589, when it was reported to the provincial synod of South Holland meeting in Gouda that several churches were holding evening services on Good Friday. The synod reacted as follows:

#### 1589 Provincial Synod of South Holland<sup>19</sup>

With respect to the second clause concerning the feast days, placards have been posted.<sup>20</sup> In this way the ministers together have taken in hand to act diligently in conformity to the regulation. In that we are given to understand that there are still places where evening services are held on Good Friday, the synod has declared that this is unedifying and therefore the classes wherein this occurs shall take action to oppose these.

The classis of Nijmegen in 1611 forbade Good Friday services and even attached a financial penalty for those daring to observe it. The only group in the Netherlands to sanction the observance of Good Friday were the Remonstrants (Arminians) who incorporated it in their church order of 1612. Finally, the churches of various provinces remonstrated the National synod of Dordrecht 1618/19 to bring about uniformity in the observance of feast days.<sup>21</sup> This synod gave the following ruling:

#### 1619 National Synod of Dort<sup>22</sup>

The committees have all handed in their advice concerning the last tabled objections, and concerning each has been decided as follows:

1. The churches shall observe in addition to the Lord's day, also Christmas day, Easter [Sunday] and Pentecost [Sunday] together with the following day. And since in most cities and provinces of the Netherlands the day of Circumcision and the Ascension of Christ are also observed, the ministers everywhere shall remonstrate the government so that in those regions where it is not the case, a uniform practice may be maintained.

And so we see that the last national synod of the age continued the attempt to reduce the feast days to a bare minimum. Another national synod would not be held until 1816 under very different circumstances.

#### THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY AFTER DORT

During the seventeenth century, however, questions began to arise as to the nature of this article of the church order. Did it make this minimal list of feast days

compulsory? Or was the list to be treated as an absolute maximum? The questions arose from various different (sometimes non-Reformed) quarters. Addressing these matters, we find the single most important church political theologian of the century, Gijsbert Voet, generally known by his Latin name "Voetius." Voetius had the honour of being the youngest delegate to the great national synod of Dort in 1618/19 while still in his twenties. His church political commentaries and tracts have been used over and over again through the centuries to shed light on the church order. In the following quotation we see him dealing with objections to the church order "partly from those who do not support presbyterian polity, and partly from those who eagerly support it." Objection # 4 concerns our topic:

*Objection:* Annual feast days, as they are commonly so called, are established by the articles of the Lowlands [i.e. the church order]. *Response:* Those articles are purely tolerating and limiting, not positive and prescriptive, as I have abundantly demonstrated in my *Disputation Concerning Feasts* 3. inserted in *Parti Select. Dispp.* I will not repeat matters here. Therefore such articles ought not to be pressed against churches or ministers, who are able εὐτάκτως ("in an orderly fashion") and

19. 30. "Opt IIde articule aengaende de feestdagen is verhaelt, dat daeraff een placcaet is uitgegaen. Soe hebben de predicanten eensamentlick aengenomen neersticheyt te doen hen daarna te reguleren. Ende alsoe men verstaet, dat noch op eenige plaetsen opten Goeden Vrydach by nachte wort gepredict, soe heeft de synode dat onstichtlick verclaert ende dat daeromme de classe, daer sulcx geschiet, tselve weeren sal." *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, 2.345 (art. 30).

20. The reference seems to be to the second part of the article of the general synod on feast days where it is said that where the magistrates ordain extra feast days the ministers must do their best by the preaching to transform the idleness of the people into a holy and profitable exercise. "Placards" were formal posters, usually with a seal, informing the people of the town of important items. The implication seems to be that these placards warned the people against idleness on these extra free days.

21. For example, the Provincial Synod of Groningen (held in Groningen) 1618. *Acta der Provinciale en Particuliere Synoden*, 7.343.

22. De Collegiën hebben elk hunne adviezen ingebracht over de laatst voorgestelde bezwaren, en is over elk in het bijzonder aldus besloten: 1. "De Kerken zullen onderhouden, behalve den dag des Heeren, ook den Christdag, Paschen en Pinksteren, met den volgenden dag. En dewijl, in de meeste steden en Provinciën van Nederland, daarenboven nog onderhouden worden de dag der Besnijdenis, en der Hemelvaart van Christus, zullen de Predikanten overal, waar dit nog niet in gebruik is, bij de Overheid arbeiden, dat in dezen deele met de andere Kerken een een parige voet mag worden gehouden." *Acta of Handelingen der Nationale Synode te Dordrecht in de jaren 1618 en 1619* (Houten: Den Hertog, 1987), p. 938 (Post Acta 162nd sitting, art.1).

with edification to procure their abolition or at least diminution before the magistrates and their people.<sup>23</sup>

Some years later he returned to the topic, adding:

Concerning the observance of the day of Christ's birth, ascension, etc. We do not interpret, as indeed here scandalisers are accustomed to do, this observance to be commanded and imposed, but its usage and tolerance to be limited; a fact that we have shown elsewhere (in the disputation *De Sabbatho* ...) to harmonise with the intent of the legislators (although the parenthesis

23. "IV. *obj.* Festa anniversaria, quae vulgo ita dicuntur, Canonibus Belgicis stabiliuntur. *Resp.* Canones illi sunt pure tolerativi, & limitantes, non positivi & praescribentes, uti abunde probavi in *Disp. de Festis* 3. *Parti Select. Dispp.* inserta: Nec hic repeto. Non debent ergo tanquam tales, urgeri contra Ecclesias aut Ministros, qui apud Magistratum & populum suum εὐτάκτως & cum aedificatione procurare possint eorum abolitionem aut saltem diminutionem." *Politica Ecclesiastica*, pars I, liber I, tractatus II (Amsterdam: Waesberge, 1663), p. 294.

24. "de observatione diei nativitate Christi, ascensionis, &c. Non interpretamur, ut quidem hic schandalizati solent, mandari hoc & imponi, sed consuetudinem ejusque tolerantiam limitari; quod convenire scopo legislatorum (quamvis parenthesis anno 1578. in Synodo Dordracenâ adjecta, anno 1586. in Hagae-comitanâ omissa sit) alibi docuimus. 3. *part. sel. dispp. tit. de Sabbatho, &c.*" *Politica Ecclesiastica*, pars III, liber I, tractatus III, cap. V (Amsterdam: Waesberge, 1676), p. 173.

25. The ensuing quotations from this disputation can be found in G. Voetius, *Selectarum Disputationum Theologicarum pars tertia* (Utrecht: Waesberge, 1659), 1344–45. The Latin reads as follows: "Alii partim permittentes, seu admittentes, seu tolerantes; partim limitantes, ut si fieri debeat, saltem hoc fiat, & nihil ulterius... Tales Canones non sunt motus proprii, nec intrinseci, nec spontanei ex corde Ecclesiae profecti; sed occasionati, extrinseci (quomodo eclipsis est propria passio lunae), ἐπεισάκτος, aliunde impositi, Ecclesiis onerosi, absolutè & in se ingrati; ad quos concipiendos, inserendos, & quasi per modum transactionis admittendos Synodi invitae compulsae & coactae fuerunt, ad majora incommoda & mala evitanda.... Ejusdem generis canon est, de observatione istorum dierum: quam Synodi nostr[a]e sponte non affectârunt; nec instituerunt, quod meliorem viam ac majorem aedificationem in eâ viderent, aut ab eâ expectarent: sed propter necessitatem à Magistratu & populo impositam, cum post omnia tentata, & observationem jam intermissam, ac decretum Synodicum anno 1574. conditum, tunc temporis abrogare non possent, eam anno 1578. admiserunt; & restrinxerunt, quousque poterant; nihilominus votum & sensum suum de meliori ac tutiori via in non-observatione, ibidem declarârunt. Quam declarationem anno 1581. in Synodo Nationali Middelburgensi non repetierunt: quod viderent se nihil profecturos, & magis abrogationem illam desiderari, quamâ sperari posse. Ex Historicâ hâc relatione, desumptâ ex Actis & Canonibus trium Synodorum modo cit. satis constare arbitror, Belgicas Ecclesias cum Theologis suis minimè dubitasse & fluctuasse, aut sibi contradixisse, aut sententiam suam de observationis illius sive necessitate, sive utilitate mutasse (tam enim indocti & instabiles non erant eximii illi Theologi Belgici, quorum praestantiores ex Scholâ Genevensi prodierant)...."

subjoined by the Synod of Dordrecht 1578 was omitted in 1586 in the [Synod of the] city of the Hague).<sup>24</sup>

The disputation here referred to, *De Sabbatho et Festis*, was held in 1638 and published in a collection of Voetius' disputations some years later. Towards the end of the second (lengthy) appendix he discusses the varied nature of the articles contained in the church order.<sup>25</sup> In this discussion he distinguishes between those articles which are prescriptive commands to the churches, and those which are "partly permissive, or concessive, or tolerating; partly limiting, so that if it must be, at least it will be this and nothing more." He continues:

Such articles are not characteristic or intrinsic or voluntary impulses having proceeded from the heart of the church; but occasional, extrinsic (just as an eclipse is a characteristic phenomenon of the moon), ἐπεισάκτος ("having been brought in"), imposed from elsewhere, burdensome to the churches, in and of themselves in an absolute sense unwelcome; to which Synods were summoned, compelled, and coerced to receive, insert, and admit, as in the manner of a transaction, in order to avoid worse disagreeable and bad situations.

Among the articles cited in this category are those concerning the right of patronage in the election of ministers, the presence of the civil magistrate at synods, and the observance of feast days. The first two articles are thankfully no longer required, and you will not find them in modern Reformed church orders based on the order of Dort. The third article in this category of articles, which are really only there because of the pressures of the civil magistrate and the stubbornness of the people, is the article on feast days! Voetius continues:

Of the like kind is the article concerning the observance of those days, which our synods did not willingly furnish or institute because they saw in them or expected from them a better way or greater edification, but because of the necessity imposed by the magistrate and the people they allowed observance in 1578, when, after all attempts—both the observance having at this point been discontinued and in addition the synodical decree established in 1574, at that point of time they were not able to abrogate it; and they restricted it as far as they were able; none the less they at that same time declared their desire and attitude concerning a better and safer way in non-observance. They did not repeat this declaration at the national synod of Middelburg in 1581: because they saw that they would gain nothing, and that

its abrogation was more a desire than something to be hoped for. From this historical report taken from the acts and articles of the three synods just quoted, I judge it to be sufficiently established that the churches of the Lowlands with their theologians minimally doubted and fluctuated, or contradicted themselves, or changed their thinking—whether by necessity or by utility—concerning that observance (for those exceptional theologians of the Lowlands were not so unlearned and unstable, of whom the more excellent ones have come from the school at Geneva)....

What Voetius wrote was not just theoretical. He had stated that the article on feast days was limiting in character, giving an absolute maximum permissible number of extra days of observance. However, there was nothing to stop churches and ministers in an orderly way reducing this number. In fact quite a number of churches and ministers of the later seventeenth century ended up not observing any feast days!

#### NINETEENTH CENTURY

Due to political influence, it was to be several hundred years before the next national synod took place. That was in 1816, after the Netherlands had been freed from Napoleon. This Synod was, however, completely in the hands of the new Dutch king, who changed the whole character of the church federation, taking away discipline in matters of doctrine and giving himself enormous influence in the church. It was not long before the faithful felt compelled to secede from what had become extreme liberalism. The secession was led by Rev. Hendrick de Cock. The first synod of the seceded Reformed Churches was held in Amsterdam in 1836. Once again, feast days were also a topic that needed to be dealt with:

#### 1836 Amsterdam<sup>26</sup>

Given that the Holy Scripture just as much admonishes the believers to *stand in the freedom with which Christ has made us free*, as to comply with the divine commandments, so ought one in the congregation of Christ to carefully watch out that, besides the precise sanctification of the Lord's Day, people are not compelled to observe the so-called feast days which the Lord has *not* commanded in His Word. The Lord's Day has been set apart by God Himself, and we cannot and may not add to it any feast by human decree. The six work days are given by God in order to work; people may indeed gather together on those days to be edified from and according to God's Word, provided that the conscience of men is not bound to the observance of

annually returning feast days appointed by men; the conscience must be left completely free in this matter.

At the next synod a year later, similar sentiments were declared:

#### 1837 Utrecht<sup>27</sup>

Given that the maintenance of feast days is not commanded in God's Word, no necessity ought ever to be laid on someone; much less must these days be equated to the day of rest. However, given that no work is done on these days, one ought to use them as much as possible in an edifying manner.

#### TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Most Reformed churches from the continental tradition in our own day use an adapted version of the church order of Dort 1618/19. It is therefore rather interesting that while most of the articles which were non-prescriptive and "limiting" in nature have been left out of modern Reformed church orders, the article on feast days has usually been maintained. This probably has to do with the fact that during the last century the observance of several feast days has become a well-known and accepted phenomenon among the people. Of particular interest is the fact that many Reformed churches in English-speaking countries have actually *increased* the number of feast days by adding Good Friday. The celebration of Good Friday has indeed a longer history in

26. "ART. 63. *Feesdagen*. Daar de Heilige Schrift even sterk de geloovigen vermaant, om te staan in de vrijheid, waarmede Christus hen heeft vrijgemaakt, als tot het in acht nemen der goddelijke ordonnantiën, zoo zal men zich in de gemeente Christi zorgvuldig wachten, om, nevens de slijpe heiliging van 's Heeren dag, de menschen te verpligten tot het vieren van zoogenaamde Feesdagen, welke de Heere niet in Zijn Woord verordineerd heeft. De dag des Heeren is door God zelven geheiligd, en wij kunnen en mogen daarbij door menschelijke bepalingen geene andere feestelijkheid voegen. De zes werkdagen zijn van God gegeven, om te arbeiden; men zal op die dagen wel te zamen komen, om uit en naar den Woorde Gods gesticht te worden, mits men maar niet de conscientie der menschen binde tot de onderhouding van door menschen vastbepaalde en jaarlijks geregeld wederkeerende feesdagen; men zal in deze het gemoed volkomen vrij laten." *Handelingen van de Opzieners der Gemeente Jesu Christi, vergaderd te Amsterdam, den 2den Maart en volgende dagen, Ao 1836* (Amsterdam: H. Höveker, 1836), p. 31.

27. "Daar de onderhouding van feesdagen niet in Gods Woord wordt voorgeschreven, zoo mag men nooit eenigen nood daarvan aan iemand opleggen; veel minder dezelve gelijkstellen met den rustdag. Daar echter, waar men op die dagen niet werkt, zal men dezelve zoo veel mogelijk stichtelijk zoeken door te brengen." *Handelingen van de Opzieners der Gemeente Jesu Christi, vergaderd te Utrecht, den 28sten September en volgende dagen, Ao 1837* (Amsterdam: H. Höveker, 1838), p. 55.

English-speaking countries than in the Netherlands. The fact remains, however, that the purpose of this article of the church order was *always* to *limit* the observance of feast days. This should mean that no church in a Reformed federation of churches has the right to add the observance of extra feast days *in addition* to those listed in the church order. The history also suggests that it should be possible for regions to agree to limit the list even further, although it is doubtful that the church order had the intent to permit individual churches to take such action without respect for the churches around them. Time and again we see the synods from the Reformation era emphasising the desire for a uniformity in practice. However, this desire for uniformity was in the first place a desire to *limit* the number of feast days observed among the churches, never to stimulate churches to *increase* the number of feast days observed.

#### CONCLUSION

We asked at the beginning, 1. do churches really need to bind each other to such days, and 2. was that really the original intention of this church order article? The overview of the historical background to this article of the church order regarding feast days shows without a doubt that no-one's conscience ought to be bound to this article or to feast day observance. In other words, church discipline may never be applied merely for the sake of non-attendance of such feast day services. The article is *not* prescriptive; that is, it is not a command. It is an agreement to limit the number of days observed as feast days in addition to the Christian sabbath or rest day in honour of our Lord. While the consistory does call to worship on these days, such a call to worship cannot be compared to those which are extended on the Lord's Day, which we are specifically *commanded* by God himself to observe as a day of worship and rest. A consistory may duly admonish members who out of laziness or lack of zeal do not attend worship on feast days, but due caution should be exercised with members who by conviction of conscience with respect to purity of worship believe that they ought not to gather together on days not specifically commanded by our Lord.

As a final note, it is of interest to note that there is at least one modern Reformed federation with a church order still based on that of the Synod of Dort, which has gone further than that Synod in limiting the influence of feast days. The Canadian Reformed Churches seem to have better captured the limiting spirit of this

article of the church order by allowing consistories the freedom to decide for themselves whether or not to hold worship services on these days. Their article 53 reads:<sup>28</sup>

Each year the Churches shall, in the manner decided upon by the consistory, commemorate the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as His outpouring of the Holy Spirit.■

#### *In Brief: Calvin Preaching on December 25, 1550/51*

“Now, I see here today more people that I am accustomed to having at the sermon. Why is that? It is Christmas day. And who told you this? You poor beasts. That is a fitting euphemism for all of you who have come here today to honor Noel. Did you think you would be honoring God? Consider what sort of obedience to God your coming displays. In your mind, you are celebrating a holiday for God, or turning today into one but so much for that. In truth, as you have often been admonished, it is good to set aside one day out of the year in which we are reminded of all the good that has occurred because of Christ's birth in the world, and in which we hear the story of his birth retold, which will be done Sunday. But if you think that Jesus Christ was born today, you are as crazed as wild beasts. For when you elevate one day alone for the purpose of worshipping God, you have just turned it into an idol. True, you insist that you have done so for the honor of God, but it is more for the honor of the devil.

... It matters not whether we recall our Lord's nativity on a Wednesday, Thursday, or some other day. But when we insist on establishing a service of worship based on our whim, we blaspheme God, and create an idol, though we have done it all in the name of God. And when you worship God in the idleness of a holiday spirit, that is a heavy sin to bear, and one which attracts others about it, until we reach the height of iniquity. Therefore, let us pay attention to what Micah is saying here, that God must not only strip away things that are bad in themselves, but must also eliminate anything that might foster superstition. Once we have understood that, we will no longer find it strange that Noel is not being observed today, but that on Sunday we will celebrate the Lord's Supper and recite the story of the nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ.” John Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah*, trans. Benjamin W. Farley (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2003), 302–304.■

28. *Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Standing Committee for the Publication of the Book of Praise of the Canadian Reformed Churches, 2010), 638.