

Book of Church Order

of

The Federation of Reformed Churches
(FORC)

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For additional information about the FORC,
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INTRODUCTION

- A. Every day in the modern world a new denomination is formed by those thinking they have a better and more Biblical way. No denomination is justified in its origin without just or necessary cause, nor should they emerge for light or frivolous reasons. This briefly is our story. The FORC came into being when, through the introduction of various unbiblical and humanistic influences, many Biblical and historic beliefs and practices had fallen into disfavor. Those holding such beliefs and practices began to be unwelcome in their ecclesiastical communities and associations. Some even faced hostilities. Though in God's providence there were some negative events involved in our origin, our desire going forward is to make a positive contribution to serving Christ's church and cause. In August 1989 the Pastors of several churches met to consider beginning an affiliation where they were free to hold and practice beliefs important to them. Also they desired to give concrete expression to their connection to the catholic church. In January 1990 the first Synod of the Fellowship of Reformed Churches took place in Fairfax, Virginia. In 1992 the name of the denomination was changed to Federation of Reformed Churches. By 1993, a *Book of Church Order* defining doctrine and government was produced.
- B. The Federation of Reformed Churches (FORC) *Book of Church Order* (BCO) is a brief explanation of the government and discipline of the denomination as drawn from the decisions of Synods.
- C. The FORC exists for the purpose of serving and nurturing local churches. The attitude of the FORC towards all is expressed in the words of the Apostle Paul, "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4).
- D. Because the FORC considers the local church the only permanently existing ecclesiastical body, most issues dealing with church government and discipline are defined and dealt with at that local level. There is nevertheless a relationship between each church within the FORC, which is defined herein.

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I. PROLOGUE AND POSITIONS

A. PROLOGUE:

1. God is to be worshipped (Doxology). The confessional response concerning the chief end of man is doxological. The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. The worship of the Triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) represents man's highest aim and greatest gain. The FORC sets forth the following to that end.
– *Psalm 29:1-2; Matthew 4:10; John 4:23-24*
2. God is to be known, believed, and obeyed (Doctrine) and therefore:
– *Micah 6:8; John 3:13-18; 17:3*
 - a. The FORC adheres to the inerrancy and all-sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures (the 39 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament), which is the final authority in all matters of life and doctrine.
– *Matthew 4:4; 2 Timothy 3:14-16*
 - b. While the FORC considers no other written document to be of the same authority as Scripture, its members hold to the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Creed of Chalcedon.
 - c. The FORC believes that the historic Reformed confessions best define the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures. The specific choice of these confessional documents resides with each member church.
3. God is the Alpha and Omega (Origins and Destiny). In addition to a fuller depiction of FORC positions which follows, Scripture proclaims that God has declared the end from the beginning.
 - a. Creation and Early Church History:

We believe that the world was created out of nothing in six normal days thousands of years ago. This truth is the historical foundation for all that the Bible teaches. We reject as a contradiction of Scripture: any form of the doctrine of evolution; any attempt to reduce the creative acts of God to a naturalistic process; any use of the literary structure of Genesis to deny that it is also a description of the actual events of creation; and any attempt to circumvent or deny Scripture's literal days and their chronological continuity with the historical record of Genesis. Thus we condemn Theistic Evolution, the Day Age theory, the Framework Hypothesis, and the Gap Theory.
– *Genesis 1:1–11:32; Hebrews 11:3*

b. An Optimistic Eschatology:

- (1) At His ascension to the throne on high, Jesus Christ received dominion, glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations and languages should serve Him. As King of kings and Lord of lords, He is now seated at God's right hand, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named.
– *Daniel 7:13-14; Ephesians 1:15-23; Revelation 19:16*
- (2) By God's grace, believers have been delivered from the domain of darkness and translated into Christ's kingdom, which, by the power of the Holy Spirit in the proclamation of the Gospel, will extend throughout the whole earth. During this age God continues to pour out His Spirit upon all flesh, as Christ puts all enemies under His feet.
– *Joel 2:28-29; Matthew 13:31-33; Acts 1:8; Romans 3:21-26; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Colossians 1:13-14*
- (3) At His final advent, the Lord will deliver the kingdom to His Father, having destroyed all His enemies. The dead in Christ will be raised incorruptible, and we shall all be changed into His likeness.
– *1 Corinthians 15:22-28, 50-58; 1 John 3:1-3*
- (4) Meanwhile, the Church Militant is divinely commissioned with the task of "occupying till He comes," carrying the Gospel of the kingdom to the ends of the earth and discipling the nations until the earth is filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.
– *Isaiah 11:9; Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 19:13; Acts 1:8*

B. POSITIONS:

In addition to those positions presented in the prior section the following are equally important. These by no means represent the exhaustive list of FORC beliefs, nor do they establish the boundaries of our fellowship. They do, however, represent some of those key areas where beliefs and practices ought to be allowed, embraced and encouraged. It should be noted that Elders seeking FORC recognition, as well as those serving as FORC Presbyters should exhibit, demonstrate and maintain a suitable embrace and encouragement of these distinctives.

1. A belief in the Kingship of the Lord Jesus over all of life and culture now:
 - a. The Kingship of Jesus began definitively at His resurrection and ascension, continues progressively throughout human history, and will be consummated at His glorious return at the end of the world.
– *Acts 2:32-36; 1 Corinthians 15:22-28; Hebrews 12:22-29*
 - b. Jesus Christ has conquered death and hell, has given Himself for His people, and sits now at the right hand of the Father as King over all creation.
– *Isaiah 9:6-7; Matthew 1:21, 28:18-20; Acts 2:32-36; Galatians 1:3-5; 2 Timothy 1:10; Hebrews 1:8-9; Revelation 1:18; Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) VIII:4; Heidelberg Catechism (HC) 31, 46*
 - c. This Kingship includes both heaven and earth. As the last Adam, Jesus is fulfilling the mandate to bring all of life under God's dominion.
– *Genesis 1:28; Psalm 2:7-12, 24:1; Isaiah 65:17-25; Matthew 6:9-10, 26:64; 1 Corinthians 15:22-28, 45-49; Colossians 1:16; Revelation 11:15-18; Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC) 45, 54, 191*
 - d. Jesus Christ rules through His Word and Spirit, and through those spheres of authority upon earth which He calls to represent Him, especially the spheres of family, church, and state.
– *Matthew 16:17-19; John 16:5-15, 17:3; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28; Ephesians 5:18-19; Colossians 3:18-21; Hebrews 4:12; HC 31*
 - e. As the historic Savoy Declaration (26:5) states: "As the Lord in His care and love towards His Church, hath in His infinite wise providence exercised it with great variety in all ages, for the good of them that love Him, and His own glory: so according to His promise, we expect that in the latter days, antichrist being destroyed, the Jews called, the adversaries of the kingdom of His dear Son broken, the Churches of Christ being enlarged and edified through a free and plentiful communication of light and grace, shall enjoy in this world a more quiet, peaceable and glorious condition than they have enjoyed."

2. A Presbyterian form of church government (see Sections II – IV).
– *Acts 15:1-29; 1 Timothy 3:1-7*
3. An adherence to Biblical ethics:
 - a. Under the Covenant of Grace, God's moral law is the perfect rule of righteousness for His creation.
– *WCF XIX:2*
 - b. God also set forth typical/ceremonial laws. The ceremonies and symbols of these laws have come to an end with the coming of Christ. As the substance of these ceremonial laws remains in Christ, in Whom they were fulfilled, the use of them ought to be abolished among Christians.
– *Belgic Confession (BC) XXV*
 - c. Man is justified by the grace of God, through faith, and created in Christ Jesus unto good works. Therefore God's ethical law remains as the standard for every area of culture and life. By striving to keep this law, we come to know our sinfulness and eagerly look to Christ for forgiveness of sins and for righteousness.
– *Ephesians 2:8-10; HC 114, 115*
 - d. The Bible, being all-sufficient, contains God's laws concerning every area of life and culture. Therefore these laws are to be obeyed in matters of government, education, business, economics, the arts, science, family relationships, personal holiness, and all else. God is covenantal in His dealings with mankind, and will bless those who keep His laws and curse those who break them.
– *Deuteronomy 28; WCF XIX:6*
 - e. Christ does not dissolve God's law in the Gospel, but strengthens our obligation to it. Obedience to God's law is not contrary to the grace of the Gospel, but complies with it.
– *Matthew 5:17-19; WCF XIX:5*

4. A belief that the Lord's Supper is an essential part of Christian worship:

God the Father has sent Jesus Christ, the living Bread, Who came down from heaven to give and to maintain the spiritual and heavenly life that belongs to believers.

The partaking of the Lord's Supper is a means of grace by which Christ works in His people all He represents by the elements of His table.

Therefore, with humility and reverence we recognize the need to receive this holy sacrament in the weekly gathering of God's people.

– *John 6:32-35, 41-51; Acts 2:42-47, 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34; BC 35; WCF XXIX:7; WLC 170*

a. The practice of Paedo-Communion:

- a. Like unto the sacrament of Holy Baptism which God graciously offers to all believers and their children, the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion, is the covenantal meal of the visible Church of Jesus Christ, in which the people of God are ever more incorporated into Christ's body, participating together in the power of endless life.

– *John 6:47-58; Acts 2:38-39; 1 Corinthians 10:14-22; HC 75, 76; WCF XXIX:1; WLC 168*

- b. As the whole people of God under the Old Covenant partook of the covenantal feasts, so the whole people of God under the New Covenant should partake of the covenantal feast of the Lord's Supper.

– *Exodus 12:43-48; Deuteronomy 16:1-17; Matthew 26:26-27; Acts 2:38-42*

- c. As the whole people of God under the Old Covenant partook of Christ, eating the same spiritual food from heaven and drinking the same spiritual drink from the Rock, so the whole people of God under the New Covenant partake of Christ, eating and drinking the spiritual food of the Sacrament of His Body and Blood.

– *1 Corinthians 10:1-4, 16-17; HC 75, 79; WLC 170*

- d. Therefore, the Lord's Supper should not be withheld from any New Covenant member in good standing. Baptized children, feeble-minded, and senile persons are to be joyfully welcomed into the Eucharistic celebration.

– *Matthew 15:21-28, 21:12-16; Mark 9:33-37, 10:13-16, 14:22-25; Luke 17:1-2; 1 Corinthians 7:12-14*

II. OFFICES

A. PRESBYTERS:

1. Presbyters are officers ordained by the local church or another ecclesiastical body for the purpose of ministering God's Word and the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Presbyters are thereby authorized to perform matrimonial rites, bury the dead, govern the local church, and perform all other duties of a Minister of the Gospel.
– *Acts 14:21-23, 20:17, 26-32*
2. One who sets his heart on a Presbyterianial office in the church, desires a noble task. However, to desire such an office is not to thrust oneself into ecclesiastical functions without a legitimate call. Such a ministry is to be entrusted to faithful and able men.
– *1 Timothy 3:1-7; 2 Timothy 2:2; Titus 1:7-9*
3. Many and necessary gifts are required for the office of Presbyter. These gifts are necessary for him to administer correctly the office entrusted to him. Therefore, a desire, necessary gifts and abilities, and a lifestyle consistent with Scripture are all required.
– *1 Timothy 3:1-7; James 3:1*
4. Concerning a mediate call, any local church within the FORC may initiate such a call according to the rules and practices of that local church. It is the responsibility of both the individual called and the church to have sufficient proofs that God wants to use this person for His means and instrument in the office of Presbyter. The local church is expected to evaluate the candidate concerning his lifestyle, theology, abilities, etc.
5. All Presbyters, unless previously ordained, are ordained by the local church initiating the call.

B. PRESBYTERS SEEKING FORC RECOGNITION:

1. *Preparation:*
 - a. Though the FORC does not state educational requirements, one must be sufficiently prepared to undertake the responsibilities of an FORC recognized Presbyter. Such preparation may be acquired through a formal theological education (i.e., Bible college and/or seminary), self-studies, practical experience, a local church training program, or a combination of any of these.

- b. The manner of preparation is not as significant as is the result of the training. One who is to be credentialed as an FORC recognized Presbyterian must have completed sufficient training to equip him for this responsibility. In order to assure this, he must undergo extensive examination prior to his recognition.

2. *Examination:*

- a. The examination of a candidate who seeks to be an FORC recognized Presbyterian shall be conducted by a Council (see Section IV, B). Council may be called by a local FORC church whenever that church considers the candidate sufficiently prepared to undergo such an examination.
- b. All men who seek to be FORC recognized Presbyters are required to undergo an examination by Council, including those who have been previously ordained by other ecclesiastical bodies. Though members of the examining Council may ask the candidate any relevant questions, Council members demonstrate wisdom in recognizing the pertinent circumstances. Though it is the responsibility of Council to assure that the candidate is sufficiently qualified, it is also its responsibility to assist the church presenting the candidate, rather than to unreasonably hinder it.
- c. Council, upon completion of such an examination, will advise the calling church in regard to the candidate's suitability for FORC recognition. Council may or may not recognize the candidate, or may advise the church of certain stipulations prior to, or concurrent with, the recognition (e.g., recommendation of further studies in a particular area). Local churches are strongly advised to comply with the advice of Council, in order for the candidate to be recognized and approved by the FORC.

3. *Credentials:*

All men approved by an FORC Council and lawfully ordained are issued a *Certificate of Recognition* by the FORC. This certificate is signed by two recognized Presbyters and signifies that the Presbyterian is recognized and approved by the FORC.

C. FUNCTIONS, DUTIES, AND AUTHORITY OF PRESBYTERS:

1. *In the local church:*

The specific functions and duties of a Presbyter in a local FORC church are determined by the Presbytery of the individual church. While some churches within the FORC may recognize a distinction between Pastor and Elder, the FORC does not.

2. *In the broader courts:*

Though there may be a distinction between particular Presbyters in a local FORC church, all recognized Presbyters are equal in authority while participating in a Council or Synod. All recognized Presbyters may participate in such broader courts; however, no more than two recognized Presbyters per Presbytery may represent each member church and its mission churches by voting.

D. MAINTAINING RECOGNITION OF A PRESBYTER:

As indicated on the FORC *Certificate of Recognition*, a Presbyter is recognized only as long as he shall maintain a godly life and is in active church ministry in accordance with the general practices of the FORC.

1. *Conduct:*

Any charges or accusations against a Presbyter must be heard and adjudicated by his Presbytery. A Presbyter found guilty of misconduct after all proper procedures have been followed, may lose his status as a Presbyter recognized by the FORC and be required to relinquish all documents distinguishing him as a Presbyter recognized by the FORC.

2. *Service:*

- a. All Presbyters recognized by the FORC are members of a local FORC church, or commissioned by her for the purpose of church planting in addition to being a member of her Presbytery.
- b. Credentials shall be revoked in the event a Presbyter departs from his local FORC church or no longer performs the duties of the office as prescribed by that church. Those commissioned shall retain their credentials as long as accountability to that local church is maintained.

- c. Previously recognized Presbyters who do not maintain such criteria will be required to relinquish any and all credentials distinguishing them as Presbyters recognized by the FORC.
- d. A Presbytery may designate any of its recognized Presbyters as honorably retired, and thus relieve him of the full scope of duties of the office. An honorably retired Presbyter may still participate in Councils and Synods. Honorably retired presbyters should be members of a local FORC church if one is within reasonable distance.

E. DEACONS AND OTHER OFFICES:

Deacons and other Christian workers are certainly needed and highly respected; however, the FORC recognizes only Presbyters as possessing ordained authority in the broader courts of the FORC.

III. MEMBERSHIP IN THE FEDERATION

A. ORGANIZED CHURCHES:

Organized churches are recognized by the presence of a Presbytery (i.e., a ruling court composed of two or more Presbyters/Elders, with at least one being local). Such churches may apply for membership in the FORC via application of the Presbyters. A local church is considered a member church when at least one member of the Presbytery of that church possesses FORC credentials.

B. CHURCH PLANTING:

Ministers involved in the task of church planting and desiring recognition by the FORC shall contact a local church within the FORC and establish a relationship with that church. An FORC church which becomes involved in such an endeavor shall be referred to as the sponsoring church. The Minister seeking recognition by the FORC shall follow FORC recognition procedures (see Section II, B). Once recognized, the Presbyter of the mission church shall be under the authority and direct supervision of the Presbytery of the sponsoring church. When the sponsoring church ordains, or installs, an additional Presbyter to serve with the first, the mission church will be recognized as a member church within the FORC.

C. MAINTAINING MEMBERSHIP:

1. *Attendance at assemblies:*

- a. Member churches are expected to be represented at all Synods.
- b. Each member, mission, and associate church shall submit a written report to each Synod (telephone Synods excluded).

2. *Dues:*

Membership dues are to be paid by each member, mission, and associate church on an annual basis, with installment payments allowed. Since Synod establishes the amount of such dues, in the case of churches unable to meet this requirement, Synod may adjust this amount accordingly.

3. *Churches not in good standing:*

A church will be considered as not in good standing if:

- a. Dues are not received for a two-year period; or
- b. The required church reports are not received for a two-Synod period; or
- c. The church fails to be represented at two consecutive Synods without proper excuse.

D. ASSOCIATE MEMBERSHIP:

An associate membership with the FORC may be requested by a Presbytery or other ecclesiastical body in general agreement with FORC doctrine and sacraments. This membership must be approved by a Council (See Section IV, B).

E. WITHDRAWAL OF MEMBERSHIP:

1. A member church may withdraw from the FORC by submitting a letter of notification which includes:
 - a. Wording of the specific motion of action passed by the local Presbytery.
 - b. Specific date of withdrawal.
 - c. Signature of a majority of Presbyters.
2. All credentials of each recognized Presbyter and FORC materials must be returned with the letter of notification. Any and all use of the FORC logo must be discontinued. The letter must be sent to the current mailing address of the FORC.

IV. ASSEMBLIES: THEIR DUTIES AND AUTHORITY

A. PRESBYTERY:

Presbytery is composed of the Presbyters of a local church and is responsible for the leadership of the church. Presbytery is the only permanently existing ecclesiastical court within the FORC.

B. COUNCIL:

1. Council is composed of at least three recognized Presbyters drawn from two or more Presbyteries. Councils are called for the purpose of Presbyterial examinations, cases of church discipline which have been appealed, or any other ecclesiastical function deemed necessary by a member church. Decisions of Council, in addition to hearings of church discipline appeals, may be appealed to Synod by affected parties. The appeal process is found in Section V.
2. Council is called by the Presbytery of a member church.
3. Council is not a permanently standing court and exists only while it is in session.

C. SYNOD:

1. Synod is composed of recognized Presbyters representing the churches within the entire FORC.
2. The purpose of Synod is to conduct business pertinent to the entire FORC, as well as to serve as an appellate court for cases appealed beyond the Council level.

The purpose of Synod is also to provide mutual accountability among Presbyters. Synod shall certify the roll of recognized Presbyters, and the Secretary shall record it in the minutes.

3. Synod is called by the Presbytery of a member church.
4. Synod is not a permanently standing court and exists only while it is in session.

a. *Moderator:*

The Synod moderator shall be elected at the beginning of each Synod.

Though the moderator is officially elected at the beginning of Synod, it is understood that generally he shall be a recognized Presbyter from the church hosting the Synod.

The hosting church shall also be responsible for any preparations necessary for the upcoming Synod.

b. *Secretary:*

The Administrator (see Section IX) shall be responsible for recording all Synod business, and to provide recognized Presbyters with the Synod minutes within 60 days of adjournment.

V. CHURCH DISCIPLINE

PREAMBLE:

Discipline, consisting of positive and negative sanctions, is part and parcel of the whole work of the ministry. The following represents polity for situations where negative sanctions may be required.

A. DISCIPLINE AND CHURCH COURTS:

1. Discipline is administered by Presbyteries, and consists of counsel, warnings, and excommunication.

All cases of church discipline, including cases that end in excommunication, must originate in and be enforced by Presbyteries.

Broader courts (Council and Synod), upon appeal:
– *Acts 15:1-35*

- (1) may concur with the actions of a Presbytery.
 - (2) may rule a Presbytery did not follow proper procedures or made a wrong judgment, and thus advise that Presbytery to reconsider its decision.
 - (3) may advise that Presbytery to reconsider its decision on the basis of additional evidence.
2. Broader courts do not, therefore, have the right to originate discipline ending in excommunication (a right belonging properly to the Presbyteries).

The authority of broader courts extends only to the right to dissolve the relationship of member churches to the FORC or the recognition of Presbyters by the FORC, when such churches or Presbyters, by their rejection of advice and counsel evidence that they are out of harmony with the doctrines and distinctives of the FORC.

B. PROCEDURE FOR HANDLING APPEALS:

1. In an appeal of a judicial case, following the final written decision of the Presbytery, the accuser or accused may, with concurring witnesses, appeal the decision to the next broader assembly in the FORC (Council).

The appeal is initiated by sending a notice of appeal to the Presbytery that decided the case and the FORC Administrator (See Section IX).

Written notice of appeal, with supporting reasons, shall be filed by the appellant with the FORC Administrator within 60 days following the final written decision of the court.

The Administrator shall send the notice of appeal to the Presbytery of another FORC member church.

The member churches shall receive notices of appeals on a rotating basis.

The Presbytery that received the notice of appeal shall then call a Council.

Members of the Presbytery appealed against shall not sit as judges on the Council hearing the appeal. Council may elect to allow the decision of the previous court to stand.

2. Following the decision of Council, the accuser or accused may, with concurring witnesses, appeal the matter to the broadest assembly in the FORC (Synod) by sending a notice of appeal to the FORC Administrator using the procedure outlined above.

The Administrator shall then request the appeal be included in new business on the agenda of the next Synod.

Members of the Presbytery and the Council appealed against shall not sit as judges on the Synod hearing the appeal.

Synod may elect to allow the decision of the previous court to stand.

3. Appeals of non-judicial decisions of Presbyteries or Councils should use the same procedure as appeals of judicial cases.

VI. WORSHIP STYLES AND PRACTICES

Worship styles and practices in the FORC are at the discretion of the local Presbytery, provided they focus on the Word and Sacraments, and are performed within the bounds set by Scripture.

VII. PROPERTY

- A. There is no standing body higher than the local church in the FORC. Therefore, any and all property is held by the member church or the mission church.
- B. Upon the termination, dissolution, or final liquidation of the FORC in any manner and for any reason, the FORC's Treasurer (or other authorized signer of the FORC's bank account) shall first pay or provide for the payment of all liabilities (unpaid bills) of the FORC; all remaining assets shall be distributed in accordance with the direction of an FORC Synod (even if called specifically for this purpose) for one or more exempt purposes within the meaning of Section 501(c)(3) of the Code (or the corresponding section of any future federal tax code).

VIII. AMENDMENTS

This *Book of Church Order* may be amended by a two-thirds majority vote of a Synod, subject to a concurring two-thirds majority vote of the subsequent Synod.

IX. ADMINISTRATOR

A. ELECTION:

An Administrator shall be elected at each Synod and will serve until the next Synod, unless he dies, resigns, is excommunicated, or loses his FORC credentials through resignation or through their dissolution by a Council or Synod.

B. DUTIES:

1. Oversee the budget and the Treasurer.
2. Oversee the FORC website, including the roster of churches.
3. Maintain the official text of the FORC Book of Church Order, and send out the printed edition or the electronic edition to interested parties.
4. Maintain a supply of the printed edition of the FORC BCO.
5. Maintain a roll of recognized Presbyters, their mailing and email addresses, and their telephone numbers.
6. Maintain records and files such as minutes of Synods, reports of churches to Synods, reports of Councils, and Treasurer reports.
7. Serve as the Secretary at Synods (see Section IV, C, 4, b).