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## APPEAL 1

### **John Shaw, Elder at Christ Community Church, Tualatin, Oregon**

*Note:* This confessional-revision gravamen was submitted to the council of Christ Community Church, Tualatin, Oregon, on July 10, 2025, but was defeated by the council. It was then submitted to the October 4, 2025, meeting of Classis Columbia but was defeated. According to Church Order Supplement Article 5, C, 4, this gravamen is now being submitted to synod for adjudication.

#### **I. Background**

Regarding my gravamen concerning the Heidelberg Catechism’s interpretation of the second commandment, classis argued that my understanding of Q&A 96 in the catechism was within the breadth of understanding of the CRC. The fact that the CRC’s Sunday school curriculum includes drawings of Jesus provides evidence that this is likely true. In this case, my disagreement is not with the CRC practice. The drawings of Christ in the CRC curriculum tell me that the CRC and I are in basic agreement, and that we both disagree with the catechism—that is to say, drawings of God (Christ) are not forbidden. I also suspect that we would agree that Michaelangelo’s painting in the Sistine Chapel of God (the Father) reaching out to Adam is not sinful precisely because it is not worshiped. The commandment speaks against the making of idols, which by definition are objects of worship. God in the Sistine Chapel, and Jesus in Sunday school materials, are not objects of worship and thus not idols. Therefore images of God are allowed as long as they are not idolized.

My concern is what the catechism says and whether it fully agrees with what the Bible says. I do not believe they are in full agreement. What does “fully agree” mean as used in the Covenant for Officebearers?

Consider the following: A man meets two people and asks them both if they support laws restricting gun ownership. One says yes, and the other does not answer but shifts the conversation to another topic. Would we say they fully agree? No! This is similar to my case.

The catechism says that making images of God is wrong, whereas the Bible makes no such statement. Thus they do not fully agree. Hence, we should alter the catechism to reflect our beliefs and bring it more in line with God’s Word, or the Covenant for Officebearers should be changed (see my overture to that end).

## II. Overview

As officers in the CRC, we are bound by the Covenant of Officebearers (2012). It states the following:

. . . We also affirm three confessions—the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort—as historic Reformed expressions of the Christian faith, whose doctrines fully agree with the Word of God. These confessions continue to define the way we understand Scripture, direct the way we live in response to the gospel, and locate us within the larger body of Christ.

Grateful for these expressions of faith, we promise to be formed and governed by them. We heartily believe and will promote and defend their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them. . . .

The Covenant for Officebearers goes on to discuss the procedure for handling concerns that may arise over the above statement.

My concern arises over the fact that we do not believe that Q&A 96-98 of the Heidelberg Catechism agree with the Word of God; in particular, we do not believe the second commandment teaches that images of God are forbidden.

## III. Notes from Scripture

The second commandment as stated in Exodus 20:4-6 (ESV) reads:

<sup>4</sup>You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. <sup>5</sup>You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, <sup>6</sup>but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

If we read verse 4 alone, it would forbid any likeness of everything in heaven, on earth, and in the waters. This would forbid essentially any recognizable image of anything, thus forbidding carvings, castings, paintings, photographs, movies, etc. But hardly any Christian would hold to this.

Thus, verse 5 must qualify verse 4. Verse 5 says you cannot bow down to or serve the images. This clearly shows that the problem is in using them to displace the proper worship of God alone.

In whatever way we choose to interpret verse 5, it must apply to all images listed in verse 4. We cannot separate out images of God from images of everything else. Thus, if we forbid images of God, we must forbid images of lakes, mountains, our children, etc. If we allow images of trees, flowers, or angels, we must allow images of God. If we forbid worship of images of God, we must forbid worship of images of people, animals, etc. We must interpret consistently. The reasonable interpretation is that the worship of images is the heart of the matter. This simply flows from and expands upon the first commandment (Ex. 20:3):

“You shall have no other Gods before me.”

A few examples will help illustrate the point.

- God commanded that images of cherubim be made on the ark of the covenant (Ex. 25:18).
- God commanded that lampstands be made with images of almond blossoms (Ex. 25:33).
- God commanded that cherubim be worked into the tent curtains of the tabernacle (Ex. 26:1).
- God commanded Moses to make a snake and put it on a pole (Num. 21:8). Later the snake was destroyed because people made offerings to it (2 Kings 18:4).

These passages indicate that God commanded various images be made for various purposes other than worshipping them, and that if they are worshipped, it is wrong to do so. Thus the heart of the matter is not the making of the image but the worshipping of the image.

Turning now to the catechism questions, they consistently forbid making images of God, but the second commandment does not forbid this. It forbids the worship of images, not the making of them as noted above. Some would argue that Leonardo da Vinci’s painting *The Last Supper*, or the drama series *The Chosen* about the life and ministry of Jesus, or nativity scenes depicting Christ, who is God, are therefore forbidden. But the second commandment forbids the worship of them, not the making or viewing of them.

Much more could be said on these topics, but this summarizes the matter.

#### **IV. Proposed Alternate Answers of the Heidelberg Catechism**

(~~Strikethrough~~ denotes deletions, and underline denotes additions.)

*Question and Answer 96*

**Q. What is God’s will for us in the second commandment?**

A. That we in no way ~~make any image of God nor worship him in any other way than has been commanded in God’s Word~~ worship or serve images but, rather, that we worship and serve God only.

*Question and Answer 97*

**Q. May we then not make any image at all?**

A. ~~God cannot and may not be visibly portrayed in any way. Although creatures may be portrayed, yet God forbids making or having such images if one’s intention is to worship them or to serve God through them.~~ Yes. We may make images of any kind, but we may not serve or worship them.

*Question and Answer 98*

**Q. But may not images be permitted in churches in place of books for the unlearned?**

A. ~~No, we should not try to be wiser than God. God wants the Christian community instructed by the living preaching of his Word not by idols that~~

~~cannot even talk.~~ Yes, images may be used in the church even as God commanded images to be used in the tabernacle, but they must not be worshiped in any way.

## V. Summary

The Word teaches that we are to worship God and are not to replace worship of him with the worship of images of any kind. Further, it does not forbid the making of images unless they are being made in order to be worshiped. Hence, we cannot agree that images of God stand separate from other images as stated in Q&A 96-98 of the Heidelberg Catechism, or that the catechism agrees fully with the Word of God on this issue.

As a final note, I believe images may adorn the church, may be used in entertainment, may be used for instruction, and may be used for other purposes with the exception of being worshiped or served.

Elder at Christ Community Church, Tualatin, Oregon  
John Shaw

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## APPEAL 2

### **John Shaw, Elder at Christ Community Church, Tualatin, Oregon**

*Note:* This confessional-revision gravamen was submitted to the council of Christ Community Church, Tualatin, Oregon, on September 18, 2025, but was defeated by the council. It was then submitted to the October 4, 2025, meeting of Classis Columbia but was defeated. According to Church Order Supplement Article 5, C, 4, this gravamen is now being submitted to synod for adjudication.

#### I. Background

Regarding the office of pastor (minister of the Word), I do not believe this office is taught in the Word. My gravamen spells out the reasons. Other arguments note that Roman Catholics have priests who offer the bread and the cup as sacrifices. But we no longer have the need of priests, for we are a nation of priests. Priests were intermediaries between humans and God. Christ is now our intermediary. Communion is not the offering of bread and the cup as sacrifices. Hence, it does not need a priest (or pastor) to offer it. We don't need pastors to replace priests. These arguments provide biblical reasons against having an office of pastor.

I set forth this gravamen because the Covenant for Officebearers requires affirming that the Bible and the confessions fully agree. And what does the phrase "fully agree" mean?

Consider the following: A man meets two people and asks them both if they support laws permitting unrestricted gun ownership. One says yes, and the

other does not answer but shifts the conversation to another topic. Would we say they fully agree? No! This is similar to my case.

The confession promotes pastors, but the Bible is silent on the subject. They do not fully agree.

This lack of agreement presents a significant problem to some of us who would be officers in a CRC church and who want to be absolutely faithful to the Word. Do we ignore the problems and sign the Covenant for Officebearers? Or do we address the problems and risk losing our standing as officers and as faithful students of the Word? Either the confession should be changed, or the Covenant for Officebearers should be changed (see my overture to that end).

## **II. Overview**

As officers in the CRC, we are bound by the Covenant for Officebearers (2012). It states the following:

. . . We also affirm three confessions—the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort—as historic Reformed expressions of the Christian faith, whose doctrines fully agree with the Word of God. These confessions continue to define the way we understand Scripture, direct the way we live in response to the gospel, and locate us within the larger body of Christ.

Grateful for these expressions of faith, we promise to be formed and governed by them. We heartily believe and will promote and defend their doctrines faithfully, conforming our preaching, teaching, writing, serving, and living to them. . . .

The Covenant for Officebearers goes on to discuss the procedure for handling concerns that may arise over the above statement.

My concern arises over the fact that we do not believe that Articles 30-31 and a related part in Article 34 in the Belgic Confession agree with the Word of God. In particular, I do not believe the Word of God teaches that there is to be an office of pastor separate from the offices of elder and deacon; this therefore is an addition to the Word of God that diminishes the role of elder as set forth in the Word.

## **III. Notes from the Word**

### *A. The word “pastor”*

In the ESV translation, the word “pastor” never occurs. In most other modern translations, “pastor” occurs only in Ephesians 4:11. We believe it to be a mistranslation there, for the underlying Greek word is “shepherd,” and in every other passage it is translated into the English word “shepherd.”

When the Greek was translated into Latin, the word for “shepherd” was correctly translated to “pastor.” But when the translations from Latin to English began, there was confusion. In early English Bibles, “pastor” was left untranslated, resulting in many passages using the Latin word “pastor” rather than the English term “shepherd.” Most modern translations translate

“pastor” to “shepherd,” except in the Ephesians passage. So why leave the Ephesians word “shepherd” as the Latin term “pastor”? This was because the Reformers created the office of pastor, and subsequently the church has chosen to retain that office.

### *B. The overseer*

Some suggest that the office of pastor stems from 1 Timothy 3:1-2, where the qualifications of an overseer are addressed. To determine whether this passage is referring to a distinct office, we should let Scripture interpret itself.

The word for “overseer” (*episkopos*) occurs seven times in the New Testament. Acts 20:17-28 (ESV) clearly identifies the role of overseer with that of elder.

<sup>17</sup>Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the **elders** of the church to come to him. <sup>18</sup>And when they came to him, he said to them: . . . <sup>28</sup>Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

Elders are the overseers of the church.

Titus 1 (ESV) again clearly identifies elders as overseers.

<sup>5</sup>This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint **elders** in every town as I directed you — <sup>6</sup>if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. <sup>7</sup>For an **overseer**, as God’s steward, must be above reproach.

The 1 Timothy 3 list of qualifications for overseers is essentially a repeat of those in Titus.

In 1 Peter 5 (ESV) the Bible again connects elders and oversight.

<sup>1</sup>So I exhort the **elders** among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: <sup>2</sup>shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising **oversight** . . .

Philippians 1:1 also identifies the officers of the church as “the overseers and deacons.” Clearly, the officers of the church include elders and deacons, and, as we have seen already, elders and pastors are synonymous.

The remaining two references to “overseer” refer to Christ (1 Pet. 2:25) and to a replacement for Judas (Acts 1:20), where the term is used in a more generic sense.

Thus we see that the office of overseer is not distinct from that of elder but, rather, that on some occasions “overseer” is used as an alternate name for “elder.”

### C. The office of elder

The word for “elder” (*presbuteros*) occurs many times in the New Testament, where it has several different meanings. In the gospels it primarily refers to the elders of the Jews, most often occurring in the phrase “chief priests and the elders” (as in Matt. 21:23). In the rest of the New Testament it primarily refers to the elders of the church. In a few places, it refers to elderly people. In this use, it appears 17 times in Acts and the letters.

If there is no office of pastor, then who is to function in this capacity? The Word of God is clear; it is the duty of elders to shepherd the flock (1 Pet. 5:2) and manage the church (1 Pet. 5:1-4; Titus 1:5-9; etc.). By maintaining the office of pastor, we have diminished the proper role of elders. Consequently, we accept much lower standards in choosing elders than what the Word specifies. Elders are to be able to teach, to preach (1 Tim. 5:17), to defend sound doctrine, be examples to the flock, etc. But many no longer meet these requirements, and the churches suffer for it. Thus the preaching and sacramental duties have been taken from the elders and given to the pastor. We see no warrant for this in the Word.

As to how the office of pastor came about, we believe it is based on an incorrect interpretation of Paul’s list of gifts given to the church in Ephesians 4:11. John Calvin said that this list is intended to be a list of offices (*Institutes*, 4.3.4), hence the office of pastor is retained in many translations. But in Ephesians 4:7 Paul is talking to all believers when he says, “Grace was given to each one of us” (ESV). This leads to verse 11, which then says that he (God) “gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers . . .” (ESV).

Consider each of these gifts. Apostles and prophets were directly chosen by God. Their importance was entirely due to their intimate relationship with God. They had firsthand communications with God and were duly respected because of it, not because they held an office. Do we still have apostles today? None we know of. Jesus certainly could choose a new apostle as he chose Paul, but he apparently has not done so. Thus this gifting appears to have disappeared. Similarly with prophets. But why would these be considered offices? Where is the list of qualifications? What are the duties?

Who approves them? This seems more appropriately a gifting or calling than an office.

How about the gift of evangelists? Calvin argued that this office has essentially disappeared but may appear as needed to establish churches where there are none. Thus, are most missionaries evangelists? Again, who appoints evangelists to their office? What are their qualifications? But are not all who share the gospel evangelists? Is this not a common gifting rather than an office?

Finally, we have shepherds and teachers. The Word tells us that shepherding, preaching, and teaching are duties of elders. Why would we need a separate office for these? And can one not have these gifts and use them with-

out being appointed to an office? In many ways we all do these things. And where does the Word say that there is an office in which preaching and the dispensing of the sacraments is separate from the office of elders? In fact, where does the Word say who can and cannot preach and perform the sacraments? The Word plainly teaches that there are two offices, one of elders and one of deacons, but nowhere does it teach about an office of pastor as described in the Belgic Confession.

I believe the list in Ephesians 4 is just what it says it is: a list of gifts given to God's people, not a list of offices distinct from elders and deacons.

#### *D. Elder centrality and apostles*

Perhaps the strongest evidence against the office of pastor comes from bigger-picture arguments. When we look at the council of Jerusalem, we see the decision against requiring circumcision was made by the apostles and elders (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4). Paul, in his letters, often speaks to or about elders (Acts 11:30; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5; Heb. 11:2; James 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1; 5:5) but never pastors. Where are the pastors? If pastor is the prominent office set forth by the Reformers, where are the pastors in the New Testament, and why is it that elders are always mentioned? This alone should be sufficient to establish that the primary office of church government is the elder and that pastors either don't exist or don't merit any significance.

Much more could be said on these topics, but this summarizes the matter.

#### **IV. Proposed alternate articles for the Belgic Confession**

The following are my recommendations for confessional revision. They all involve striking certain phrases, and in one case adding a few words to make the remaining text grammatically correct. (~~Strikethrough~~ denotes deletions, and underline denotes additions.)

##### *Article 30*

We believe that this true church ought to be governed according to the spiritual order that our Lord has taught us in his Word. ~~There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and administer the sacraments.~~ There should also be elders and deacons, ~~along with the pas-tors,~~ to make up the council of the church. By this means true religion is preserved; true doctrine is able to take its course; and evil people are corrected spiritually and held in check, so that also the poor and all the afflicted may be helped and comforted according to their need. By this means everything will be done well and in good order in the church, when such persons are elected who are faithful and are chosen according to the rule that Paul gave to Timothy.

##### *Article 31*

We believe that ~~ministers of the Word of God,~~ elders, and deacons, ought to be chosen to their offices by a legitimate election of the church, with prayer in the name of the Lord, and in good order, as the Word of God teaches. So

all must be careful not to push themselves forward improperly, but must wait for God’s call, so that they may be assured of their calling and be certain that they are chosen by the Lord. ~~As for the ministers of the Word, they all have the same power and authority, no matter where they may be, since they are all servants of Jesus Christ, the only universal bishop, and the only head of the church.~~ Moreover, to keep God’s holy order from being violated or despised, we say that everyone ought, as much as possible, to hold the ~~ministers of the Word~~ and elders of the church in special esteem, because of the work they do, and be at peace with them, without grumbling, quarreling, or fighting.

*Article 34*

~~... So ministers, as far as their work is concerned, give us the~~ We receive the sacrament and what is visible, but our Lord gives what the sacrament signifies—namely the invisible gifts and graces; washing, purifying, and cleansing our souls of all filth and unrighteousness. . . .

**V. Summary**

The Word teaches that the elders are to minister the Word (teaching and preaching) and to shepherd the flock. I just do not see anywhere in the Word that the church is governed and served by someone holding the separate office of pastor as described by the Belgic Confession. Hence I cannot agree that Articles 30, 31, and 34 of the Belgic Confession fully agree with the Word of God.

As a final note, I am not opposed to churches having “pastors.” I am not proposing changes to the Church Order. I simply do not believe the Bible sets forth an office of pastor, and thus the confession should not do so either (or the Covenant for Officebearers should not say they “fully agree”).

Elder at Christ Community Church, Tualatin, Oregon  
John Shaw