

INDEPENDENCY

The Biblical Form

Of Church Government

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BOON-SING POH



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Government

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To

all Reformed Baptist brethren
who love "the gates of Zion".

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PREFACE

This book is a summary – the barest summary – of the more substantial book, "The Keys Of The Kingdom: A Study On The Biblical Form Of Church Government", written by the same author. This smaller work is intended to help the busy Christian understand the various forms of church government practised by different churches today.

Eleven principles of church government are expounded. Together, they define for us the *jus divinum* (divinely ordained) form of church government.

This book is suitable for use in Bible classes. The title of each chapter is followed by one or two Bible passages which may be read as the background to the topic under study.

It is inevitable that differences of belief and practice are raised in a book of this nature. If anyone,

PREFACE

or any view, has been misquoted or misrepresented, it is purely unintentional. It is hoped that the reader will be charitable towards the author for these shortcomings, and be open to the biblical truths here expounded.

Thanks are due to Ms. Pauline Chum for proof-reading the manuscript, and to Ms. Julie Pang for getting the manuscript ready for publication.

Boon-Sing Poh,
Kuala Lumpur, July 1997.

One

Introduction (2 Tim. 3:16-17)

Is there a divinely ordained (Latin, *jus divinum*) form of church government? We believe there is, for the following reasons:

- i The Bible is the sole authority in all matters of faith and practice. This means that: (a) it must be obeyed (i.e. "authoritative"); (b) it is able to teach us all that is necessary for the Christian or church life (i.e. "sufficient"); and, (c) it may be clearly understood (i.e. "perspicuous").
- ii Christ, as head of the church, exercises the offices of prophet, priest, and king. The church must submit itself to Christ's headship by: (a) preaching

the truth ("the primacy of preaching"); (b) worshipping correctly ("the purity of worship"); and (c) ordering its life correctly ("a biblical church government"). Our concern in this book is with the last of these areas.

- iii The "regulative principle" applies not only to worship, but also to church government (cf. 1689 Confession, 1:6).¹ Whatever is done must find its sanction in Scripture, although "some circumstances" are to be ordered by the light of nature.

¹The 1689 Confession of Faith states, in Chapter 1, paragraph 6: "The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down *or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture*: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the word, and that there are some circumstances concerning *the worship of God, and the government of the church*, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed." (Italics added for emphasis.)

1.1 Four Forms Of Church Government

1 Historically, four basic forms of church government have evolved, each possessing certain main characteristics:

(i) *Episcopacy* is characterised by an hierarchy of individuals in the power structure of the denomination, fanning down from one individual at the top.

(ii) *Presbyterianism* is characterised by: (a) an hierarchy of committees of individuals forming a gradation of church courts; and (b) the local churches being ruled by elders.

(iii) *Independency* is characterised by: (a) the autonomy of the local church; and (b) the local church being ruled by elders, but with congregational consent.

(iv) *Congregationalism* is characterised by: (a) the autonomy of the local church; and (b) rule being exercised by the congregation, through a process of democratic voting to get a consensus.

2 Episcopacy is also known as Prelacy. In the past,

people think only of three basic forms of church government: Episcopacy, Presbyterianism, and Independency. Congregationalism was thought of as just an extreme expression of Independency, and the names "Congregationalism" and "Independency" were used interchangeably. Today, it would not be right to treat the two as the same. In fact, a lot of confusion would not have arisen if the two had been treated as different systems from the early days.

- 3 Eleven principles of church government may be discerned from the Bible: the autonomy of the local church, the headship of Christ, rule by elders, the priority of the ministry, the validity of ruling elders, the unity of the eldership, the popular election of church officers, the ordination of church officers, rule with congregational consent, the gathered church, and the communion of churches. Together, they describe for us the biblical form of church government. We shall consider each of these principles in turn in the subsequent chapters.

1.2 The Nature Of The Church

1 The Greek word *ekklesia* is used 115 times in the New Testament. It means "a called out assembly". The word is translated mostly as "church", and sometimes as "assembly". In three instances, it is used in the "heathen sense" to refer to the disorderly crowd at Ephesus (Acts 19:32, 39, 41). In two cases, this word is used in the "Jewish sense" to refer to ancient Israel as God's chosen and separated people (Acts 7:38; Hebrews 2:12 quoting Psalm 22:22). In the rest of the more than one hundred times, the word is used in reference to a Christian assembly.

2 In the "Christian sense", the word is used in only two ways, to refer to:

(i) The local (or visible) church, made up of baptised disciples in a given area who are covenanted together (e.g. Acts 20:17; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:2; Revelation 1:11; 2:1). The local church is "visible" in the sense that it is made up of discernible members.

(ii) The universal (or invisible) church consisting of all the elect of God in the past, present, and future

(e.g. Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 3:10; 5:25, 27; Colossians 1:18). The word "catholic" is sometimes used instead of "universal". The universal church is "invisible" in the sense that the true members are known only to God.

3 Unbiblical ideas of the church have been propagated, including:

(i) The visible catholic (or universal) church, consisting of all those throughout the world who profess faith in Christ, together with their children. This is held in Episcopacy and Presbyterianism.

(ii) The national church, consisting of all who profess faith in Christ, and their children, in a nation. This is held in Episcopacy (e.g. the Church of England) and by some Presbyterian denominations (e.g. the Church of Scotland).

(iii) The denominational church, consisting of a number of congregations associated together under a common government. This is held in Episcopacy (Anglican, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches in many countries).

(iv) The presbyterial church, consisting of the leaders and office-bearers of congregations meeting to-

gether in different grades of authority (called a synod, assembly, etc.). This is held in Episcopacy and Presbyterianism.

(v) Any gathering of believers who are engaged in fellowship, prayer, or some gospel work. This is held by most advocates of para-church organisations,² and many other misguided Christians.

(vi) Denials of the universal church. The Landmark Baptists, prominent in America in the last century, denied the existence of the universal church. They claimed that only Baptist churches are true churches. The Witness Lee type of "local churches" hold to a similar idea, believing that there should be only one church in each geographical area, namely the one which belongs to them!

- 4 Membership in a local church is not always coincident with membership in the universal church, and vice versa. Professed believers who are unregenerate may unwittingly be admitted into the membership of the local church, as was the case with Ana-

²Organisations which operate independently of the church. The claim is that such organisations complement the work of local churches. For more on the local church, see Poh, "A Multifaceted Jewel".

nias and Sapphira (Acts 5). Also, true believers may be precluded, by circumstances or through ignorance, from membership with a local church for a time, as was the case with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8).

- 5 A good definition of a local church is as follows: "A local church is a congregation of believers in Christ, baptised on a credible profession of faith, and voluntarily associated under special covenant for the maintenance of the worship, the truths, the ordinances, and the discipline, of the gospel" (Hezekiah Harvey).
- 6 There are five characteristics in the universal church of Jesus Christ:
 - (i) *Unity*, which is spiritual in nature (Ephesians 4:3-6; 1 Corinthians 12:12-13);
 - (ii) *Sanctity*, meaning that its members are regenerate people (1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Peter 2:5);
 - (iii) *Catholicity*, which refers to the unity of faith among all who are redeemed by Christ's blood;
 - (iv) *Apostolicity*, meaning that it possesses and exhibits the doctrines, the spirit and the life of the

apostles (1 Corinthians 3:11; Ephesians 2:19-20);
and

(v) *Perpetuity*, meaning that it will continue to the end of time (Matthew 16:18; 28:20).

These characteristics of the universal church should be reflected in the local churches. In practice, we may determine which is a true church by the following characteristics: (a) the proclamation of the pure word of God; (b) the right administration of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper; (c) the exercise of church discipline to maintain the purity of its membership.

7 The ultimate shape of a house depends not only on its foundation, but also on the framework built upon it. Our understanding of the meaning and nature of the church determines to a great extent the form of church government that we adopt. This is the foundation. Apart from that, we must consider the relevant principles from Scripture to define clearly the form of church government. Those principles constitute the framework.

Questions

- 1 Give the possible reasons why many Christians are either ignorant of, or not bothered about, the biblical form of church government.
- 2 A true church will have the preaching of God's word, the correct administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the exercise of church discipline. Discuss how these will affect a believer who is seeking for a church: (a) to worship in during his travels; and (b) to be a member of.
- 3 Give the possible reasons why para-church organisations flourish.

Reference

- 1 Poh, Boon-Sing. May 2020. A Multifaceted Jewel: Studies On The Local Church. Good News Enterprise.
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Two

Autonomy Of The Church

(Matt. 18:15-20; Rev. 1:9-2:1)

The principle stated: Each congregation is to be self-ruling. The power to rule itself has been communicated by Christ to the congregation. There is no individual, no body of individuals, and no institution (whether civil or ecclesiastical) outside the congregation which has the right or power to exert rule over that congregation.

The principle of "autonomy" may be proved by three considerations: first, from the pattern of rule established by God for His people in biblical

times; second, from the direct teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ on church government in Matthew 18:15-20; and third, from the definitive teaching found in the first three chapters of the book of Revelation.

2.1 Visible Congregations

1 God's people have always been governed as visible entities, or congregations.

(i) Before the Flood, and after that, the worship of God was performed in large families, e.g. Abraham's household.

(ii) The nation of Israel was a congregation (Leviticus 4:13-15). They met in "the tabernacle of meeting", or literally, "the tabernacle of the congregation" (Leviticus 1:3; 17:4, 5). Three times in a year, all the males appeared together at the tabernacle and, later, at the temple, in Jerusalem. Priests and Levites were stationed permanently at Jerusalem, acting as representatives of the nation to offer up sacrifices.

(iii) The synagogues, instituted during the exile, were also congregations. The Lord honoured the

worship in the synagogue.

(iv) The New Testament churches were separate congregations. Their formation were prophesied in such Old Testament passages as Ecclesiastes 12:11 and Isaiah 4:5.

2 Those who argue pragmatically that the church in Jerusalem must have been too large to worship "under a single roof" fail to take into consideration the following:

(i) The early believers actually met in one wing of the temple called Solomon's Porch until they were scattered by persecution (Acts 5:12; 3:1, 11; 8:1).

(ii) The early converts included a great number of visitors from all over the Roman empire, as well as the vicinity of Jerusalem, who returned later to form congregations in Judea and beyond (Acts 9:31). The persecution recorded in Acts 8:1 would have further scattered the believers. The church in Jerusalem was not too large to have gathered as one congregation.

3 God dealt with His people as congregations. Each congregation was dealt with independently. Each

congregation was therefore autonomous, i.e. self-ruling. There was never any individual ruling over many separate congregations, such as is found in Prelacy. There was never a "church" of presbyters or elders, who ruled over a number of congregations, such as is found in Presbyterianism. Presbyterians like to appeal to Acts 15 in support of their system. That passage, however, records the meeting of representatives of one church with the members of another church, not the gathering of representatives of many churches (Acts 15:4).

2.2 The Final Court Of Appeal

- 1 The "church" of Matthew 18:17 cannot be a reference to the universal church, as claimed by the Presbyterians and the Episcopalians. The context shows that the sinning brother is to be restored by definite, tangible, efforts of private admonition followed by admonition in the presence of one or two witnesses, and finally by bringing the case before the church. If there were any authority higher than the local church, we would expect this to be clearly stated, since the Lord has taken the trouble to men-

tion the three initial steps. The "church" here is not to be understood in the abstract sense of "all that is involved at higher church levels", nor as a reference to presbyters gathered in a synod. A text must be understood according to its plain meaning. It must also be understood in its context. These are basic principles of biblical interpretation.

- 2 If there is no higher authority to appeal to in so serious a matter as church discipline, leading to the expulsion of a church member, we conclude that the church has to be autonomous. Those who argue that the Christian church was not in existence when the Lord uttered the words of Matthew 18:15-20 have failed to give due allowance for the progressive nature of revelation. The Lord did anticipate the formation of the Christian church. In John 17:20, 23, the Lord prayed for future converts. Although the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) and the Lord's Supper were in actuality given to the eleven apostles, they were in effect given to local churches in subsequent generations.

2.3 Independent Congregations

1 The book of Revelation is important to the study of ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) because:

(i) It is part of the Bible, and neglect of the book will leave us that much the poorer in the understanding of God's will for us. The difficulty in understanding the book has been exaggerated.

(ii) The first three chapters record a vision that directly concerns the church and its relationship to Christ. The lampstands are identified as seven churches (Revelation 1:20). The chief character is clearly identified as the Lord Jesus Christ (Revelation 1:13, 11, 17, 18). The vision in Chapters 2 and 3 is couched in plain language which should not be difficult to understand, except perhaps for the meaning of "the angel" of each of the churches.

(iii) The discipline of Biblical Theology teaches us that God's revelation came to man progressively and cumulatively. The later revelation must be regarded as the fulfilment or ultimate development of all the earlier types, precepts, principles and teachings. The book of Revelation was given last. It speaks with finality to us.

- 2 In the vision of Revelation 1, John saw seven lampstands, not seven lamps on one lampstand (Revelation 1:12, 13, 20). The lampstands that John saw were different from the lampstand found in the Old Testament tabernacle. Matthew Poole, commenting on Revelation 1:12, said, "In the Jewish tabernacle there was one golden candlestick, and seven lamps, to give light against it; so Numbers 8:2; Zechariah 4:2. John here sees seven. God had but one church of the Jews, but many among the Gentiles." It is widely recognised that the number "seven" is symbolic of perfection and completeness. The seven churches of Asia are actually symbolic of all Christ's churches in the New Testament age.
- 3 That the seven churches in Asia were independent of one another, and therefore autonomous, is further confirmed in Chapters 2 and 3. Each of them was held directly accountable to the Lord for its purity and faithfulness.

Questions

- 1 How would you answer the Presbyterian claim that

Acts 15 supports the idea of an hierarchy of church courts? Consider: (i) whether the passage records the meeting of elders of many churches; (ii) whether this single instance shows that the churches concerned were associated in the Presbyterian way.

- 2 How would you answer those who claim that the "church" in Matthew 18:17 is a reference to "all that is involved at higher church levels"? Does this passage support the claim of the Congregationalists that rule is to be exercised by the congregation?
 - 3 What problems of interpretation will we encounter if Christ is "in the midst of the lamps", instead of "in the midst of the lampstands"?
-

Three

Headship Of Christ

(John 18:28-38; 1 Tim. 6:11-16)

The principle stated: Jesus Christ is head over the church. A church that recognises Christ's headship will submit to Him as Prophet, Priest, and King.

The principle of "the headship of Christ" is central to the discussion on church government. From it flows many, if not all, of the other principles that make up the system of church government taught in the Holy Scripture.

3.1 The Principle Proved

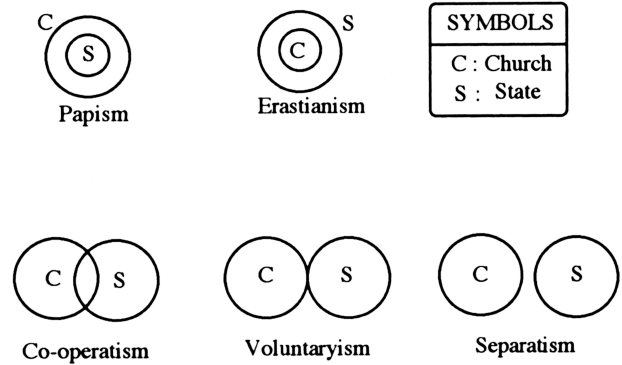
- 1 There are many direct and indirect proofs. The direct ones include Colossians 1:8; Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:23. All these passages refer to the universal church of Christ. The universal church manifests itself in the world as local, visible, congregations. If Christ is the head of the universal church, He is also head of every local congregation. Other relevant passages are John 18:36 and Matthew 28:18.
- 2 As head of the church, Christ acts as the mediator between God and men (1 Timothy 2:5). He, therefore, holds the offices of prophet, priest, and king. Both the *number* and the *order* of these offices are important. The recognition of this will help us in:
 - (i) Determining what constitutes a true church;
 - (ii) The work of reforming our own churches;
 - (iii) Determining the extent of fellowship we might have with other churches.
- 3 A church that acknowledges Christ as prophet will submit to His teaching as revealed in the word of God. The sole authority of Scripture in all matters of faith and practice will therefore be acknowl-

edged. The importance of doctrine to the life of the church, and the primacy of preaching in worship, must be recognised. The church should strive towards greater purity and faithfulness in both doctrine and practice.

- 4 The church that acknowledges Christ as priest must engage in pure and acceptable worship. The Regulative Principle must be clearly understood and properly applied. The word of God is sufficient for all our needs. It shows that God must be worshipped "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24), i.e. with sincerity and in accordance to the Scripture. Nothing must be added, and nothing must be taken away (Deuteronomy 12:32; Revelation 22:18-19). Among those who uphold the Regulative Principle of worship, there have been differences of opinion on the actual *applications* of that principle. One church must respect another when differences like these arise.
- 5 The church that acknowledges Christ as king will seek to organise itself in the way prescribed in the Bible. As with worship, so also in church government – human traditions and personal inclinations

should not determine how the church is run.

3.2 The Principle Denied



- 1 *Papism* is one of the five systems of belief on the relationship between church and state. Papism, or Popery, claims for the pope of the Roman Church power over both the spiritual and the temporal realms. Two views are held in that church, which do not make much difference to us. One view is that power is vested solely in the pope. Another view holds that power does not reside in the pope individually but in the pope in conjunction with a general council, which represents the church at large.

Papism denies the headship of Christ explicitly (i.e. clearly and directly).

2 *Erastianism* is the doctrine that maintains the supremacy of the state over the church. The monarch (king or queen) of the nation is held to be the head of the church. Erastianism began to appear in the fourth century when Constantine professed conversion and favoured the Christian faith in his realm. Advocated by Martin Luther in Germany and Henry VIII in England, this theory has had historical manifestations in the state churches of Scandinavia, Germany, and England. Erastianism also denies the headship of Christ explicitly.

3 *Voluntaryism* was the view held by the Particular Baptists in the seventeenth century in Britain and America.. It is the view which we regard as most consistent to the teachings of the Bible. It has three characteristics:

(i) The separation of church and state: This is also known as "the principle of co-ordinate authorities". The church and the state are two co-equal and independent powers. Both are ordained by God (Romans 13:1-7; Matthew 22:21). Each is supreme

in its own sphere of rule, and in the execution of its functions. There should be no interference of one with the other. However, there is nothing to stop the church from benefiting from the conditions provided by the state that are conducive to the progress of the gospel. Conversely, there is nothing to prevent the state from benefiting from the life and activities of the church.

(ii) The mutual subordination of persons: An individual may be a member of both the church and the state without there being any conflict of interest or loyalty.

(iii) The voluntary nature of efforts to promote the cause of the gospel. Men are creatures, living in God's realm, and by God's good pleasure. They are held accountable to God for how they live, no matter whether this is recognised by them or not. The church may benefit from the voluntary efforts of unbelievers to promote the cause of truth. However, it must not expect or demand from, nor be obligated to, such unbelievers.

4 *Separatism* was the view held by the Donatists in the fifth century, and by the Anabaptists during

the Reformation. It is upheld today by some Congregationalists, and also by the Mennonites. The headship of Christ is recognised, but it places an extreme and unbiblical separation between church and state. It denies the mutual subordination of persons, claiming that a believer belongs to Christ's kingdom, and an unbeliever to the world. A believer is not permitted to be a magistrate, to join the army, or to take oath. Separatism also maintains that the promotion of the cause of God lies entirely with believers, and that the church should never accept any help or benefits from the state.

- 5 *Co-operatism* denies the headship of Christ implicitly, and is upheld in traditional Presbyterianism. Most modern Presbyterians tend to accept Voluntarism. While Separatism takes the separation of church and state to one extreme, Co-operatism destroys true independence and separation by advocating the *lawfulness* and *obligation* of alliance between church and state. Co-operatism is linked to a string of errors which have manifested themselves in the history of the church. These included enlisting the help of civil authorities to promote the

cause of God, the practice of infant baptism, the denial of the liberty of conscience (freedom of religion), and the persecution of those who disagreed on such matters as infant baptism.

Questions

- 1 Some Christians claim that they are "reformed" simply because they hold to the doctrines of grace. How would you help them to understand what it means to be truly "reformed"?
- 2 How does Voluntaryism affect us in: (i) our attitude to the state; (ii) receiving help from an unbelieving millionaire to build a church; (iii) living as a Christian and a citizen?
- 3 Discuss the difference between: (i) "freedom of religion" and "toleration of religion"; (ii) "the limits of liberty" and "the limitations imposed upon liberty". If we hold to the liberty of conscience, what should be our attitude to other religions?

Four

Rule By Elders (1 Tim. 5:1-25)

The principle stated: Biblically qualified men who are duly recognised and appointed by the congregation exercise rule over the congregation. The power of rule resides with the church. The authority to exercise rule lies with the elders. That authority comes from Christ through the church.

Two elements are involved in the principle of "rule by elders": first, that there is such a thing as rule (or government) in the church; and, second, that those who exercise rule are the elders. A number of preliminary considerations are needed to properly unfold this principle.

4.1 The Power And Authority To Rule

1 If Jesus Christ is the head of the church, the power¹ to rule the church must rest in Him and come from Him. Jesus Christ has given to the church the power to rule itself. (These are truths we have learned from the earlier chapters.) In order that this power may be exercised, officers are appointed in the church.

2 Prelacy believes that the power of rule was originally given to Peter and has been passed on from him to the subsequent popes. Presbyterianism believes that the power resides in the eldership – whether local, regional or national. Congregationalism believes that the power resides with the congregation. In Independency, the power of rule resides in the church, but the authority to exercise that rule is with the elders. The elders receive that authority directly *from* Christ, *through* the church.

¹The difference between "power" (or ability) and "authority" (or right) should be noted. I may have the power (or ability) to chop down a tree by the roadside, but I have not the authority (or right) to do so. The authority lies with the local council.

4.2 The Concept Of "Office"

- 1 The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines an office as, "A position to which duties are attached, especially a place of trust, authority, or service under constituted authority." The Quakers, Plymouth Brethren and Modernists have attempted to deny the idea of office, claiming that only the exercise of gifts is important in the church. The Charismatic movement and the para-church organisations have made similar claims. In reality, both gifts and office-power are important to the church.
- 2 Although the word "office" is not found in the Bible, the concept is clearly taught. In 1 Timothy 3:1, the Greek word *episcope* means "overseership", i.e. the position or office of overseer. The same word is used in Acts 1:20 in reference to the position of an apostle. The word *hieratia* in Luke 1:9 and Hebrews 7:5 denotes "priest's office". It has long been recognised that Jesus Christ, as the Mediator, holds the offices of prophet, priest and king.
- 3 The concept of office is important for at least two reasons.

(i) It means that a generic word may take on a technical meaning when applied to an office. For example, the word "apostle" basically means "one who is sent out", and is so used in Acts 14:14. When applied to Paul and the twelve disciples of Christ, it takes on a technical sense with the connotation of office. Similarly, "elder" means someone senior in age (e.g. Luke 15:25; Acts 2:17). When used in the technical sense it refers to the leaders of Israel (Numbers 11:16), the Sanhedrin² (Matt. 16:21), or the leaders of the church (Acts 20:17, 28).

(ii) It means that an office is inseparably connected with authority, gift, and duty while gift and duty need not be associated with office. This helps us to understand that the gift of prophecy could be possessed by people who were not prophets (Acts 19:6; 21:9), and that the functions of the evangelist continue although the office has ceased (Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 10:14-15).

²The Sanhedrin was the council of seventy leaders who ruled over the people of Israel in the time of Christ.

4.3 Officers Of The Church

- 1 Apostles, prophets and evangelists were extraordinary officers given to the church during its foundation period (Ephesians 4:11; 2:20). They had extraordinary calls to office and were given extraordinary gifts to fulfil their tasks. No direction is given to us in the Bible to appoint such officers, showing that their offices have ceased. We have noted that the functions of the evangelist continue. Men may be singled out to preach and plant churches although they do not occupy any office. These men were called "teachers" by the Particular Baptists.
- 2 The continental Reformers and the British Puritans identified four permanent officers: pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons. Many, including the early Separatists, added a fifth, namely "widows" or "relievers", either as a distinct office or as female assistants to the deacons, on the basis of 1 Timothy 3:11 and 5:9-10. The Particular Baptists held to the view that there are only two remaining offices: elders and deacons. There are two sorts of elders: teaching elders (pastors and teachers, or ministers) and ruling elders (1 Timothy 5:17; Ephesians 4:11).

All pastors are elders, but not all elders are pastors. Pastors rule and teach, while ruling elders only rule.

- 3 The qualifications for the office of deacon are similar to those for the office of elder, except that there is no requirement for the ability to teach. No office of deaconess is taught in the Bible, although some have attempted to argue otherwise. The Greek word *gune* in 1 Timothy 3:11 literally means "women", and is most probably a reference to the wives of the elders and deacons.

4.4 Rulers Of The Church

- 1 The authority to rule or govern the church is in the hands of the elders, not the deacons. This is clear from the following:
 - (i) The *office* of elder or bishop carries with it the authority to execute the power of office, which is to rule the church.
 - (ii) The *titles* of this office, namely "elders" and "overseers", speak of the authority to rule or govern.

(iii) The *work* of ruling or governing the flock is specifically entrusted to them (Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 3:5; 1 Peter 5:2).

(iv) The *submission* of the church members to them, through obedience and respect, is required (Hebrews 13:7, 17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12).

(v) *Examples* are given of elders who lead and rule the churches (Acts 13:1-3; 15:3, 4, 6, 22; 21:18).

- 2 The office of deacon is subordinate to that of elder. The New Testament describes elders, and not deacons, as bearing the rule of the church. Since deacons are members of the church, it follows that they are also under the rule of the elders just as the other church members who do not hold office. The task of deacons is to "serve tables", i.e. to deal with the temporal affairs of the church. They are to help the elders, receive instructions from them, and report to them.
- 3 No female elders are taught in the Bible. However, the role of women in the ministry of the word should not be downplayed. Women were active in gospel work, playing a complementary and supplementary role under the leadership of men, or when

accompanied by their husbands (Acts 18:26; Romans 16:3-16; 1 Cor. 9:5; Philippians 4:3). Older women should be trained and set apart to teach and minister to the younger women in the church (Titus 2:3-5; 1 Timothy 5:9-10).

- 4 The principle of "rule by elders" is denied in Episcopacy and Congregationalism. It is upheld in Presbyterianism and Independency.

Questions

- 1 "Gifts, not office! Service, not power! Out with autocracy! We don't want a 'One-man-show'! We believe in the priesthood of all believers!" Who are the people likely to utter such sentiments today? Are they right or wrong? Why?
- 2 "Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Resist a deacon and he will fly at you!" This is not untrue in many a church. What has happened in the church to allow this situation to develop?
- 3 We believe that there are only two remaining offices in the church: that of elder and that of dea-

con. What do you think of the idea of recognizing "teachers" and women helpers in the work of the ministry?

Five

Priority Of The Ministry (Numbers 12:1-16)

The principle stated: The ministry of God's word has the priority in the life of the church. Of the two sorts of elders, the teaching elders have the priority over the ruling elders. The teaching elders are the pastors, teachers, or ministers of the word. As far as possible, the pastor is to be supported full-time, to concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the word.

The Christian ministry, as it is traditionally understood, is being undermined by various trends today. For this reason alone, the priority of the min-

istry needs to be re-asserted with vigour and clarity. Furthermore, the chief way of ruling the church is by the law of Christ applied to the conscience of church members. It is, therefore, appropriate to introduce the principle of "the priority of the ministry" at this point.

5.1 The Priority Of The Ministry

- 1 The principle of "the priority of the ministry" needs to be re-asserted today because of the presence of tendencies to undermine it. In the Christian world at large, there are the para-church organisations, the Charismatic movement, and Brethrenism that emphasise the exercise of gifts by every Christian while denying the concept of "office". Among Reformed Baptists, there are those who advocate the "Absolute Equality" view of the eldership, which also has the effect of undermining the office of the minister of God's word (see below).
- 2 The priority of the Christian ministry arises from:
 - (i) *The primacy of the word*: The word of God is to occupy the pre-eminent place in the life of God's

people and the church (Deuteronomy 6:6-9; Psalm 119:103-105; Romans 10:17; Ephesians 4:11-16; 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

(ii) *The primacy of preaching*: The proclamation of the word is the primary task of the church and of ministers (1 Timothy 3:15; Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 6:4; 2 Timothy 4:1-5).

(iii) *The validity of full-time preachers*: Christ has given ministers of the word to the church, of which the "pastors and teachers" continue while the extraordinary officers are no more (Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 5:17). The preacher and the act of preaching are inseparable (Romans 10:13-15; 2 Corinthians 2:14-15). Whenever possible, preachers are to be supported financially by the church (1 Corinthians 9:1-15).

(iv) *The doctrine of "the call"*: Ministers of the word must have a divine call from God – an inward constraint given by God. This constraint to preach must not be confused with a carnal desire for vain glory, or a mistaken estimate of one's gifts and calling (Jeremiah 1:6 cf. 20:9; Matthew 9:38; Acts 13:2; 1 Corinthians 9:16). The qualities of author-

ity (or dignity) and humility (or a "servant spirit") is combined in a minister of the gospel – authority from Christ to proclaim the word, and a servant of Christ to the church to serve.

(v) *The concept of "office"*: There are two offices in the church – that of elders and that of deacons. However, it is not wrong to speak of the "offices" of minister and pastor. Since the extraordinary ministers are no more, we might say that the offices of pastor and minister have merged into one. In the office of elder, we find certain elders who also occupy the office of pastor or minister (1 Timothy 5:17). These are the "teaching elders" while the others are the "ruling elders". The Christian ministry has the priority because it encompasses the two offices of elder and minister of the word.

(vi) *Leadership in the church*: Scripture teaches the necessity of clear leadership among God's people – leadership of the right kind, characterised by the "servant spirit" (Mark 10:42-45), arising from love for God and men (Matt. 22:35-40). Moses was the leader among the elders of Israel (Numbers 12).¹ Peter was the leader of the twelve apostles. Paul

was the leader of the missionary team sent out by the church in Antioch. The pastor is the leader among the elders. The angels of the churches – the seven stars in Christ's right hand – were most likely the pastors of the churches (Revelation 1:20).

3 The ministry of the word should have the *primacy* (i.e. the supreme place, the pre-eminence) in the life of the church. It should have the *priority* (i.e. being earlier, occupying the position of greater importance) over other matters. Of the two types of elders, the teaching elders have the priority over the ruling elders. Two practical implications are:

(i) The church should seek to appoint a teaching elder, or pastor, before a ruling elder. It should support a pastor before other full-time workers.

(ii) If there are more than one elder in the church, the pastor should be the leading elder. Elders lead the church, and the pastor (or one of them, if there are more than one pastor) leads the eldership.

¹It is to be noted that Moses was, in fact, not one of the seventy elders but one different from the seventy (Exodus 24:1, 9; Numbers 11:16). His leadership appears to be emphasised in this, as in the incident in which Aaron and Miriam spoke against him (Numbers 12:2).

5.2 Denials Of "Priority"

- 1 The Particular Baptists affirmed and protected the priority of the ministry by incorporating a paragraph (Chapter 26, paragraph 10) into the 1689 Confession of Faith, which specifically spells out the office of the pastor. Pastors are those who labour in the word and prayer full-time, and are supported financially by the churches. The words "pastor" and "minister" are used interchangeably in the Confession to refer to the teaching elders, and not to the ruling elders or to all the elders. This was also the view of other Independents like John Owen.
- 2 Some Reformed Baptists are advocating a view of the eldership in which all elders are regarded as equal, with no distinction between them, apart, perhaps, from the different functions they perform. To them, all elders are pastors. This is what we would call the Absolute Equality View. One stream of opinion, arising from America, appears to have adopted Presbyterian ideas into a Baptist setting. Another stream, arising from United Kingdom, appears to have been sympathetic to the Charismatic movement and Brethrenism. Their emphasis on

the equality, or parity, of elders, has the effect of undermining the Christian ministry. The principle of "the priority of the ministry" is thus denied.

Questions

- 1 In Brethren churches, worship centres around the Lord's table instead of the preaching of God's word. The idea that there should be an elder who is set aside full-time to preach the word, called the pastor, is not accepted. Why do you think they adopt these ideas and practices? Are they right?
 - 2 Based on the qualities of "dignity" and "humility" in the minister of the gospel, what would you expect to see in his preaching and life in the church?
 - 3 Should our church support full-time: (a) a ruling elder; (b) a church clerk; (c) a woman teacher of the word? Give biblical reasons.
-

Six

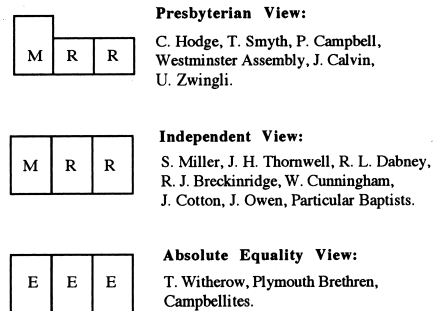
Validity Of Ruling Elders

(Acts 20:17-38)

The principle stated: Scripture teaches that there are two sorts of elders: teaching elders and ruling elders. The pastors exercise two sorts of duties: teaching and ruling. The ruling elders exercise one sort of duty, namely, ruling. Ruling elders are needed not only to minimise the possibility of autocracy in the minister, on the one hand, and anarchy of the congregation, on the other, but also to help the pastor in the work of pastoral oversight.

The current controversy in Reformed circles over the eldership issue is not new. Similar unrests had occurred in the past among the Presbyterians. All these controversies revolved around the validity of the office of ruling elders in the church.

6.1 The Presbyterian Controversies



Symbols: M for minister; R for ruling elders; E for elders.

- 1 In the seventeenth century, the Presbyterians in the Westminster Assembly (which produced the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Shorter Catechism) were disagreed over the actual status of the ruling elders in a church. The official position of

the Assembly was that ruling elders are not presbyters of the New Testament sense. Rather, they are lay representatives of the congregation in the session or presbytery (i.e. the board of elders).

2 The controversy surfaced again in the nineteenth century. It ended with three distinct views, instead of two.

(i) *Presbyterian View*: This corresponds to the official position of the Westminster Assembly. This view has three serious weaknesses. First, it lacks scriptural authority for its largest group of office-bearers. The lay elders perform the functions of ruling according to Romans 12:8 and 1 Corinthians 12:28, but are not the elders mentioned in other passages. Second, it smacks too much of the clericalism of Prelacy, in which the church is divided into "clergy" and "laity". Third, the pre-eminence given to the office of the minister makes it prone to autocracy.

(ii) *Independent View*: Although held by some Presbyterians in the seventeenth century, it was most fully developed by the Independents and was universally upheld by them. In this view, there is but

one office of rule, namely the office of elders. There are, however, two sorts of elders – teaching elders and ruling elders. The teaching elders are the pastors or ministers of the word. The teaching and ruling elders share the same office *of rule*, but not the same office *of teaching*. This view is consistent with all the relevant passages of the Bible (e.g. 1 Timothy 5:17; Ephesians 4:11; Revelation 1:20; 2:1; 1 Corinthians 9:1-18; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

(iii) *Absolute Equality View*: Any distinction between the elders is regarded as unjustifiable. All elders are regarded as pastors who share the same functions, although circumstances are such that one of them often ends up doing most of the preaching by virtue of his training. This view denies the doctrine of the call, the priority of the ministry, as well as the distinction between teaching and ruling elders. The "especially" in 1 Timothy 5:17 is regarded as *descriptive*, and not *distinctive*. In other words, it is claimed that the word carries the meaning "as much as" or "seeing that". This is, of course, incorrect. The Plymouth Brethren and the Campbellites¹ have held to this view.

6.2 The Reformed Baptist Controversy

- 1 Ruling elders gradually disappeared from among the Independent churches in the eighteenth century, partly because of the unsettled situation brought about by the persecution of Nonconformists (i.e. those who did not submit to the practices of the Church of England). There was also the added influence of the Congregationalists who believed in rule by one pastor, and assisted by many deacons.
- 2 The situation of one pastor assisted by many deacons prevailed among the Baptists, despite the attempt of C. H. Spurgeon to restore the office of ruling elders. Reformed Baptists today are fumbling about trying to recover a plurality of elders in the church. A number of them have succumbed to the Absolute Equality View, in which two main principles are emphasised: the plurality of elders and the equality of elders.
- 3 The Absolute Equality View are prone to many dangers, some of which are inherent to the system,

¹The Campbellites are also known as "Disciples of Christ" and "the Christian Church". They believe that baptism by immersion is necessary for salvation. The movement was founded by Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) in America.

while others are its effects upon other churches.

(i) One danger it is prone to is the "committee syndrome" in which there is no clear leadership, and the elders end up preaching in turns, like what is practised in Brethren circles! Another danger is that of authoritarianism, seen in the eldership as a body. In their attempt to avoid individual pre-eminence, the elders take great pains to work as a body. A decision that issues forth from such a situation can be devastating in its effect, especially when "heavy shepherding" (i.e. close pastoral care that intrudes into the legitimate liberties of the members) is practised.

(ii) This view has caused much damage in other churches. One particular strong personality may begin to agitate for a plural eldership to be set up, if there is none, or for equality among the elders to be more obviously seen in practice. The theory of equality provides the ideal facade for him to hide the crave for power and recognition. The "Diotrephes spirit" is stirring in him, but he conveniently claims that it is the "truth" of equality that he is fighting for! The person becomes difficult to

work with, and a split in the church might occur if the problem is not wisely and firmly handled.

- 4 Advocates of the Absolute Equality View prefer to call their system the Parity View. How do they justify the principle of plurality? It is based on Acts 13:24 and Titus 1:5, in which the plural, "elders", is mentioned. Added to that is the fact that the New Testament always mentions elders in the plural. The insistence on a plurality of elders is not right, however, because an apostolic example only sets a norm, or an ideal, to be followed, and not a command to be obeyed under all circumstances. That view fails to take into consideration the fact that there were churches that had not elders, at least for a time (Acts 9:31; 14:21-23). When there are no qualified men for office, none should be appointed. Furthermore, there is a failure to take into consideration the factor of the need of the church. Churches in the New Testament time were generally bigger and more mission-minded than many churches of today (e.g. 1 Corinthians 1:2 cf. 2 Corinthians 1:1). As a church grows bigger, more elders are needed.

- 5 In view of the different problems faced by churches today over the eldership issue, it would be better to advocate the principle of "the validity of the office of ruling elders". This is a wider principle that encompasses the concept of "plurality", for when ruling elders are appointed to help the pastor, would there not be a plurality of elders? Apart from minimising the possibility of autocracy (one man exercising absolute rule) in the minister, as often happens in Episcopacy, and anarchy (lawlessness) in the congregation, as often happens in extreme Congregationalism, ruling elders are needed to help the pastor in the many duties of pastoral oversight.

Questions

- 1 In the Absolute Equality View, what has happened to the office of: (i) the minister, and (ii) the ruling elders? Why is this view attractive to some people?
- 2 What is likely to happen if an unqualified man is appointed to be an elder?
- 3 What can the church do to help the situation when

there are no ruling elders appointed yet to help the pastor?

Seven

Unity Of The Eldership

(Acts 20:17-38; Tit. 1:5-16)

The principle stated: All pastors are elders, but not all elders are pastors. All elders are equal only in the general sense that they occupy the same office of ruling. The eldership is quantitatively one in that all the elders, considered together, constitute one body that has the oversight of the church. The eldership is qualitatively one in that it should function as one body.

The Absolute Equality View holds to two main principles, namely "the plurality of elders" and "the equality (or parity) of elders". We have shown

that it is better to hold to "the validity of ruling elders" rather than "the plurality of elders". Here, we wish to show that it is better to hold to "the unity of the eldership" rather than "the equality of elders".

7.1 "Unity" Versus "Equality"

1 Those who believe in "the equality of elders" claim that the words "elders" and "overseers (or bishops)" are used interchangeably in Acts 20:17, 28 and Titus 1:5, 6. Three wrong assumptions are involved:

(i) It is assumed that no significant distinction is to be made between the elders since they occupy the same office. Other passages, like 1 Timothy 5:17, however, show that there are two sorts of elders – namely, teaching elders and ruling elders.

(ii) It is assumed that the words "elders" and "overseers" are interchangeable with the word "pastor". This is not right because the verb "to pastor" is used in Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2, and not the noun (cf. Eph. 4:11).

(iii) It is assumed that the elders are equal in every way, since the same qualifications are required of

them in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. However, the possession of all the qualifications only qualifies the men for office. It does not mean that they all have the same abilities. Moreover, in 1 Timothy 5:17, honour is to be given specially to the elders who labour in the word and doctrine. The pastor, as distinguished from the ruling elders, needs to have the ability to teach to a high degree. He must also have a divine call to the ministry.

2 The only equality taught in the Bible with respect to leadership in the church is that of the *office* of elder itself. All elders are equal in the sense that they occupy the same office of ruling. They are only equal in the general sense of being members of a body, the eldership, in relation to the other members of the church. *Together*, they rule the church. *As one body*, they govern the church. Within that body, however, there are differences. The pastor is to be the leading elder by virtue of "the priority of the ministry". If there are more than one pastor in the church, one of them should be acknowledged as the leading elder.

3 The principle of "the unity of the eldership" means

that the eldership is quantitatively one in that all the elders, considered together, *constitute one body*. It means also that the eldership is qualitatively one in that it should *function as one body*. This principle arises from all the "elders" passages of the New Testament.

(i) The words "elders" and "overseers" are used interchangeably in Acts 20:17 and 28, and in Titus 1:5 and 6, because of this reason: the eldership is one.

(ii) This accounts for why elders are always mentioned in the plural, e.g. Acts 14:23; Philippians 1:1.

(iii) This explains why only two offices, and not three, are referred to in the church, e.g. Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1-13.

(iv) This is also the reason why passages that clearly show a distinction between the two sorts of elders nevertheless speak of them *together* as elders (1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:17 cf. 7).

(v) For the same reason, no distinction is drawn between the two categories of elders when pastoral oversight is referred to (1 Thessalonians 5:12;

Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4; James 5:14), but a clear distinction is made when preachers of the word are referred to (Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Corinthians 9:14; Colossians 4:12, 17; James 3:1; Revelation 1:20; 2:1).

- 4 The principle of "the unity of the eldership" runs parallel to the principle of "the unity of the church" (1 Corinthians 12). Just as the church is one body, in which is a diversity and a unity, so also the eldership is one body, in which is a diversity and a unity.

7.2 Implications Of "Unity"

- 1 A corollary of the principle is that the whole eldership is responsible for both the teaching and the rule of the church. The authority to teach and to rule (the two "keys of the kingdom of heaven"¹), is committed to the eldership as a body. The teaching elders are the ones who *execute* the authority of teaching, but the whole eldership has the *responsibility* over that department of the government of the church. In practice, this means that the whole eldership must ensure that no heresy is

taught in the church, and that the whole counsel of God's word is taught. Any defect in the teaching of the church must not be blamed on the preacher alone but on the whole eldership. The ruling elders, however, must not dictate to the preacher on what he may or may not preach. On his part, the preacher needs to take into consideration the occasional suggestions of the other elders with regard to his preaching.

2 In Episcopacy, there is no eldership of any kind. In Congregationalism, the functions of the eldership have been taken over by a committee made up either of the pastor and deacons, or of other church members, of whom one is the chairman. The principle of "the priority of the ministry" is not upheld. Since there is no eldership of the biblical sense, it is not possible to speak of "the validity of ruling elders" or "the unity of the eldership". Presbyterianism has inherited the three views of eldership

¹This expression comes from Matthew 16:19. Comparison with Matthew 18:18 shows that the authority "to bind and loose" (by proclaiming the truth and exercising church discipline, or, more broadly speaking, by teaching and ruling) was committed to all the apostles, and not to Peter alone. Authority was, thereby, given to the churches of Christ.

from the nineteenth century: namely the Presbyterian View, the Independent View, and the Absolute Equality View.

- 3 Reformed Baptists have been attempting to recover a plurality of elders. Some have succumbed to the Absolute Equality View, with all its dangers and weaknesses. The way ahead for Reformed Baptists is not to follow or adopt any form of Presbyterianism, but to recover the eldership of early Independency, in which is upheld the principles of "the priority of the ministry", "the validity of ruling elders", and "the unity of the eldership".

Questions

- 1 In the process of ruling the church, how may the principle of "the unity of the eldership" be breached by: (i) the ruling elders, (ii) the pastor?
- 2 A church that believes in the Independent View of eldership may not have: (i) any ruling elders yet; (ii) a pastor yet. What should it do about the situation?

3 Why do you think the Reformed Baptists today are easily influenced by Presbyterianism?

Eight

Popular Election

(1 Tim. 3:1-13; Tit. 1:5-9)

The principle defined: The appointment of office-bearers must involve the guidance of the existing elders and the consent of the congregation. The existing elders inform the church of the number of new office-bearers needed, the functions they are expected to perform, and the qualifications they must possess. The actual nomination and election of deacons are left to the congregation, under the oversight of the existing elders. In the appointment of new elders, the existing elders nominate the candidates while the congregation elects from among them.

Two steps are involved in the appointment of office-bearers: election and ordination. Election consists of two steps: determining the qualifications of the candidates, and electing them.

8.1 Qualifications Of Elders

1 The man in his essence:

(i) *A believer*: If this is required for church membership, it is even more important for the eldership.

(ii) *A church member*: Although it is not wrong to call a pastor from another church, the normal method is to choose an elder from the congregation. The members must know the man personally and be able to willingly entrust their souls unto his care.

(iii) *A man, i.e. a person of the male sex*: This is required specifically by the relevant Bible passages (1 Timothy 3:1,2; Titus 1:6), and consistent with the overall divine pattern of male leadership: in society, in the home, and in the church (Genesis 3:16; Ephesians 5:22-24; 1 Corinthians 11:3; 1 Timothy

2:8-15).

(iv) *Spiritually mature*: A new convert is disqualified (1 Timothy 3:6). If the man is young in age, he must possess a spiritual and mental maturity that is well beyond his years before being considered for office.

(v) *Chosen of God* (*Acts 20:28 cf. 13:2; Ephesians 4:11*): His character and gifts will be the objective indications as well as confirmation of this (*Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:28-29; 1 Timothy 3:1-7*). The church must come to an overall consensus that he is a man raised up by the Head of the church. The candidate, on his part, must at least be willing, if not actually desiring, to serve as an elder (*1 Timothy 3:1; 1 Peter 5:2*).

2 The man in his character:

(i) *A husband of one wife*: It is not required that the man be married before he can hold office. If he is married, he should be a husband of one wife. God tolerated polygamy in the Old Testament time, but He never approved of it. The New Testament

teaches monogamy (Matthew 19:4-6, 10).

(ii) *Blameless and of high moral qualities*: This is to be seen in his person, and in his relationship to others. In his person, he must be temperate, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, a lover of what is good, not addicted to alcoholic drinks, not greedy for money or other material gains, and not self-willed. In his relationship to others, he must be a man of good behaviour, hospitable, gentle, not quarrelsome, not quick-tempered, and not violent.

(iii) *A servant spirit* (Mark 10:42-45; 1 Peter 5:2-3): A servant spirit must not be confused with a servile spirit (Proverbs 29:25; Acts 5:29). Equally, the lack of fear of man must not be confused with a domineering attitude (2 Timothy 2:24-25).

3 The man in his gifts:

(i) *The ability to rule*: To rule is not merely to carry out administrative duties or to execute some plans, but to lead and care for people. The ability to rule is manifested in the way he takes care of his own household. His wife and children must respect him and be in subjection to him, not as a tyrant, but as a loving husband and father (1 Timothy 3:4-5;

Ephesians 5:22-6:4). It is required that the wife be a believer, but it is not required that the children be believers. The qualifications listed of the wives in 1 Timothy 3:11 are actually the description of converted people (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:5). The description of the children in Titus 1:6 is not a reference to converted people but to those who are "in submission with all reverence" (1 Timothy 3:4).

This does not mean that the elder will be free from problems in his relationship with his wife, or in the disciplining of his children. A man is not disqualified from office if: (a) he is in overall control of his household, (b) he is making definite efforts to improve the relationship with his wife and in the disciplining of his children, (c) progress is seen in these efforts, and (d) none of his family members may be accused of insubordination or behaving like pagans (e.g. drinking, gambling, worshipping idols, consulting mediums, etc.).

In the case of an unmarried man, some indication of his ability to rule should be seen in the way he handles people. Do people respect his opinions and turn to him for counsel? Does he get on well with

others and work well with them? Are children naturally attracted to him? Does he set a good example for others? Is he disciplined in his private life? Is he known for his readiness to serve and to edify others?

(ii) *The ability to teach (1 Timothy 3:2)*: This does not mean the ability to preach in public. Rather, it means the ability to correctly explain the word of God and to apply it to the conscience of others, whether in public teaching, in personal counselling, in evangelism, or in refuting those who are in error (Titus 1:9). The ability to teach also implies a clear and strong grasp of the overall sweep of the Bible's teaching. All elders, and the pastor in particular, should be able to affirm, without equivocation, the Confession Of Faith of the church.

The qualifications needed of deacons are similar to those of elders, except that it is not required of them to be able to teach. Deacons attend to the temporal affairs of the church while elders concentrate on the spiritual aspects of the church's life (Acts 6:2-4). The task of the deacon is equally a "spiritual" work: i.e. it is ordained by God, and

geared to the spiritual welfare of the church. For that reason, high spiritual qualities are required of deacons (Acts 6:3, 5).

Although the office of deacon is subordinate to that of elder, it is not necessary for a man to be appointed a deacon before he is appointed as an elder. In fact, serving as a deacon is not a good preparation for the ministry but a hindrance to the study, prayer, and meditation needed for it. Elders should be appointed first, rather than deacons, when suitably qualified men are available. This is particularly so in pioneering situations (cf. Acts 14:21-23).

4 The call to the ministry:

The Bible teaches that there is a difference between the pastor, or teaching elder, and the ruling elder, although they share the same office. Since the pastor is an elder, he needs to fulfil all the qualifications needed of an elder (1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). Since the pastor is the preacher of God's word, he needs to be called of God to this task. The call consists of:

(i) A prominence of the gifts to edify others, espe-

cially that of preaching;

(ii) The presence of a desire, born of right motives, to be a minister of the word (Jeremiah 20:9; Amos 3:8; 1 Corinthians 9:16; 1 Timothy 3:1).

8.2 Popular Election

- 1 This refers to the manner, or method, by which the church chooses an office-bearer. It is "popular" because it is the people, i.e. the church members, who choose. It is "election" because the people choose biblically qualified individuals under the guidance of the existing elders. The biblical idea of "election" is different from the modern idea in which individuals put themselves forward as the potential candidates for office, which is followed by their campaign and lobby for votes, and finally the people choosing from among the names that have been put forward.
- 2 The New Testament shows that popular election involves: (a) the guidance of the existing elders, and (b) the consent of the congregation.
 - (i) In Acts 1:15-26, Matthias was chosen to be an

apostle (an extraordinary officer) and had to fulfil the qualifications required of an apostle (vs. 21-22). He was chosen by divine intervention, in the casting of the lots – an Old Testament method that no longer applies to us. However, as an ordinary officer (or elder),¹ he was chosen by the people, under the guidance of the existing church officers.

(ii) In Acts 6:1-7, the existing elders (the apostles) guided the congregation to the choice of the right men to be deacons, by clearly delineating the functions and qualifications of the office.

(iii) In Acts 14:21-23, the same procedure was carried out. It was Paul and Barnabas who "appointed" elders. The word "appointed" (Greek, *cheirotoneo*) means to choose by stretching forth the hands. Although the word need not be taken to mean literally a stretching forth of the hand, it, at the very least, indicates that the consent of the congregation was involved.

3 The passages of Scripture referred to do not tell

¹The word "office" (*episkopen*) in Acts 1:20 is the same as that used in 1 Timothy 3:1, referring to the position of an overseer or elder. The apostles also functioned as elders of the church.

us the exact procedures to adopt in the choice of office-bearers. The following procedures have been successfully adopted by many churches, perhaps with minor variations:

(i) In the appointment of deacons, the existing elders inform the church of the number needed, the qualifications required of them, and the functions that they are expected to perform.

(ii) The church nominates suitable candidates in a given period of time, say, one month. The nominee should have consented to his nomination when approached by others. The number of nominees may turn out to be more than the actual number of deacons needed. The elders have a right to veto any nomination if they deem the nominee unfit for office. This is best done privately. The reasons for rejecting the nominee may be made known to the nominator.

(iii) The list of nominees is made known to the church so that the members can pray, with the aim of electing the right men.

(iv) At a church members' meeting, a secret ballot is taken. Each member is not allowed to vote

for more than the number of deacons needed. The candidate that has two-thirds or more of the total number of votes is considered elected. The outcome may be that less than the needed number of deacons are elected.

(v) The procedures for the appointment of elders are the same as those for deacons, except that instead of the church nominating the candidates, the existing elders do the nomination (cf. Titus 1:5; 1 Timothy 5:22; 2 Timothy 2:2).

- 4 When prayerfully done, an office-bearer so appointed must be accepted as the choice of the Holy Spirit for the church. The next step that is necessary to complete the appointment of the office-bearers is their ordination.

Questions

- 1 Can a person be wrong about his call to the ministry? How can this be minimised?
- 2 Why is it that most churches adopt a two-thirds majority as indicative of unanimity in a vote? Why

not 51%? Why not 90%?

- 3 What can we do to help a man who obviously has the gifts, but is unwilling to serve in office?

Nine

Ordination

(Num. 27:12-23; Acts 6:1-7)

The principle stated: New office-bearers are to be ordained by the elders laying hands on them, with prayer. Fasting is also required in the case of the ordination of elders. Ordination has the *meaning* of separation, dedication, or consecration of the person unto God. The *purpose* of ordination is to solemnly and publicly recognise, confirm, separate and dedicate the person in the office.

Two steps are necessary to complete the call, or appointment, of an elder or deacon to office –

election and ordination. The process of election has been dealt with in the previous chapter.

9.1 The Nature Of Ordination

1 From Acts 6:5-6, 14:23 and 13:1-3, the following may be said about ordination:

(i) Ordination and election are distinct and co-ordinate (parallel) actions. They are not to be confused and confounded. Neither must any one of them be exalted above the other. Each serves a different, although related, purpose. When we have the one, we ought to have the other.

(ii) Ordination always follows election, and never before it. To reverse the order would be to go against clear biblical teaching. It would confound election with ordination.

(iii) While election is the activity of both the elders as well as the members of the church, ordination is the activity of the elders only. This is practically speaking for, in principle, the whole church is involved in the ordination by the very fact of its unity, as well as its consent in the act. For that reason,

ordination is to be performed before the congregation that is gathered together, and not in secret (cf. Numbers 27:22-23). The exceptional situation in which there is no previously ordained elder will be considered below.

(iv) Ordination involves at least the laying on of hands and prayer. Fasting is also required in the case of the ordination of elders and ministers of the gospel.

- 2 By the process of election, a person is recognised and accepted into office. Both the elders and the congregation are involved in that process. Once so elected, the person enters into a new relationship with the church which was not previously there. If it is to the pastor's office, the pastor-flock relationship exists from that point on. Unless otherwise stipulated by the church, the pastor from that point on begins to function with the authority that is inherent in that office.
- 3 From the many instances of the laying on of hands, prayer, and fasting in the Bible (e.g. Genesis 48:14; Numbers 27:22-23; Matthew 19:15), we draw the conclusion that ordination carries the *meaning* of

separation, dedication, or consecration of the person unto God. The *purpose* of ordination is to solemnly and publicly recognise, confirm, separate and dedicate the person in the office.

- 4 In the Bible, the laying of hands was also for conveying the visible gifts of the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:17; 19:6). The ability to do so was a mark of the extraordinary officers (2 Cor. 12:12; Mark 16:18), the purpose of which was to confirm the word of God that came through them (Hebrews 2:3-4). Since extraordinary officers and extraordinary gifts have been withdrawn, we may not claim that ordination conveys supernatural power of any kind to the one being ordained. In the present climate, worldwide, where many are claiming the ability to perform and confer extraordinary gifts, it is necessary to make this clear at an ordination service. The necessity of doing this is further accentuated by the extravagant claims of Prelacy that "grace" of some kind is transmitted from the ordainer to the ordained.
- 5 It should also be noted that the two steps involved in the appointment of office-bearers, namely election and ordination, do not confer the *offices* nor

the *power of office* to them. If these were so, it would mean that the church or the persons performing the ordination have the inherent power to create and bestow offices to the persons ordained, and that these new officers would be servants of the church and not of Christ. Rather, the clear teaching of Scripture is that the offices and officers are gifts of Christ to the churches (Ephesians 4:11-12). Election and ordination are the means by which the ones concerned are recognised, chosen, and installed into office by the church. The new officers may then discharge their duties by the exercise of the power of office.

- 6 How is ordination to be performed when there are no elders in the church? This situation might conceivably arise in a new church. In such a situation, the assistance of pastors or elders of other churches should be sought. This is because of "the communion of churches". It should be noted, however, that any defect in election or ordination that arose from exceptional or unavoidable circumstances does not disannul the call of a person to the office. This is because "extraordinary cases are accompanied

with a warranty in themselves for extraordinary actings and duties" (John Owen).

9.2 Differences On Ordination

- 1 The early Independents believed in ordination. This is clear from the 1689 Confession of Faith (Chapter 26, paragraph 9), the Savoy Platform of Church Polity (paragraph 11), and the Cambridge Platform of 1648 (Chapter 9). Today, some Reformed Baptists have been influenced by Congregationalism and regard ordination as optional.
- 2 In Prelacy, ordination is perverted by claiming for it more than is warranted by Scripture. Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England believe in "apostolic succession", which traces ordination to the time of the apostles. Both these churches agree that: (i) the church has the power of communicating the Holy Spirit to the person ordained, there-by conveying to him supernatural grace and power with which to administer the word of God and the ordinances; (ii) the church has power to confer the office of the priesthood, and to make real priests and not ministers.

- 3 In Presbyterianism, the office of minister is separated from the office of pastor. The pastor must always be a minister, but it is not necessary for the minister to be a pastor. The minister is ordained by the representatives of the local churches who form the synod. He may then become the pastor of a local church by the consent or election of the church members. Election and ordination are thus separated and reversed in their order. Furthermore, it is claimed that ordination not only *recognises and admits* the person to office, but it also *invests the right* to discharge the functions of office. This is to confuse and confound ordination with election.
- 4 Traditionally, Congregationalism upheld ordination. This is clear from the various Confessions Of Faith of the early Congregationalists. With time, the Congregationalists appeared to have played down the importance of ordination. This could have been due to their emphasis on "the priesthood of all believers", which led to an emphasis on the importance of democratical election, in which the whole church is involved, and a consequent downplaying of ordination, in which only the elders are in-

volved. Another possible reason may be their reaction to the Episcopalian sacerdotalism ("priestcraft") attached to ordination. Today, many Congregational churches treat ordination as optional. One error, however, does not justify another. We must return to a true understanding and proper practice of ordination.

Questions

- 1 Should there be any difference between the ordination of a pastor and that of a ruling elder? Why?
- 2 If there is no such thing as a "minister-at-large", who are to do the work of evangelising the heathens and church-planting?
- 3 May a person be ordained the pastor of more than one congregation? Why?

Ten

Rule With Consent

(Matt. 16:13-20; 18:15-20)

The principle stated: This is the practice whereby the elders seek the consent of the congregation as they exercise rule over the church. The consent is given implicitly in the case of preaching, teaching, and admonition. This is the "key of teaching". It is given explicitly, often by a show of hands, in the decisions that affect the external circumstances of the whole church. This is the "key of ruling".

Elders are the ones who exercise rule in the church. The power to rule the church has

been called "the keys of the kingdom of heaven". Elders have the authority to rule, but *how* exactly do they rule?

10.1 The Principle Defined

1 The principle of "rule with congregational consent" may be defined as the practice whereby elders seek the consent (or agreement) of the congregation as they exercise rule over the church.

(i) The consent is given *implicitly* (i.e. assumed, or not expressed) in the case of the direct application of the word of God to the personal and spiritual life of the members, in public preaching and private admonition. This has been called "the power of teaching (or order)". It is the first "key of the kingdom of heaven".

(ii) Consent is given *explicitly*, often by a show of hands, in decisions that affect the external circumstances of the whole church. This has been called "the power of ruling (or jurisdiction)". It is the second "key of the kingdom of heaven".

2 Rule with congregational consent may be proved

from apostolic examples.

(i) The appointment of elders and deacons involved congregational consent (Acts 1:15-26; 6:1-7; 14:21-23). This we have considered in the chapter on "Popular Election".

(ii) The congregation was also involved in the appointment of delegates of churches (Acts 15:1-3; 1 Corinthians 16:3; 2 Corinthians 8:19).

(iii) In the settlement of disputes, the elders made the decisions with congregational consent (Acts 15:6; 16:4 cf. 15:22, 23, 25).

(iv) The congregation was involved in the exercise of church discipline (1 Corinthians 5:4-5, 7).

10.2 The Principle Applied

1 In the actual governing of the church, various principles are applied.

(i) "Rule by elders" is put into operation when the elders make the decision and bring it to the congregation for its consent.

(ii) "Rule with consent" operates when the congregation gives its consent to the elders' decision, af-

ter questions have been answered and comments have been made. The congregation may be asked to make suggestions, when appropriate.

(iii) "The priority of the ministry" is recognised when the pastor leads the elders in the decision-making process, and chairs the church business meetings.

(iv) "The validity of ruling elders" is shown by the manifold duties of the eldership. The pastor cannot function well without the help of the ruling elders.

(v) "The unity of the eldership" is seen in operation when the elders come to unanimity of decision, and present their decisions to the congregation for its consent. This is also seen in the fact that the eldership rules the church as a body.

2 Under normal circumstances, the congregation has a duty to give its consent to the decisions of the eldership. What is to be done when the congregation refuses to give its consent, even though the decisions of the elders are for the good of the church and according to the law of Christ? The elders must:

(i) Diligently instruct the congregation from the word of God concerning the matter under consid-

eration;

(ii) Declare to them the danger of their dissent in obstructing the edification of the body, to the dishonour of the Lord and their own spiritual disadvantage;

(iii) Wait patiently for the time when both eldership and congregation can come to agreement.

(iv) If the church remains adamant in not carrying out its duty, the advice of other churches may be sought.

3 The principle of "the unity of the eldership" must not be breached by the ruling elders or the pastor.

(i) The ruling elders should not fail to support the pastor when criticism or concern are brought by the church members against the ministry of the pastor. If not wisely handled, polarisation and division might occur in the church.

(ii) The pastor, on his part, should heed the advice or suggestions of the elders. Inability to receive criticism of his ministry, and intransigence (uncompromising stubbornness) on his part, can result in

alienation between the pastor and the church members.

10.3 The Principle Disputed

- 1 "Rule with congregational consent" is upheld in Independency. It has come under severe attack, especially by the Presbyterians. As in Independency, the principle of "rule by elders" is upheld in Presbyterianism. But unlike in Independency, the principle of "rule with congregational consent" is not upheld in Presbyterianism. Instead, the principle of "rule by representation" is practised, in which the elders rule without the necessity of congregational consent.
- 2 "Rule with congregational consent" is not upheld in Episcopalism. The clergy implements the decision passed down from higher up in the hierarchy regardless of the views of the congregation.
- 3 In Congregationalism, the principle of "rule by the congregation" is wrongly argued from those passages that support "rule with congregational consent". By holding to the former, the latter is com-

prehended. However, Congregational meetings tend to become chaotic because the principle of "rule by elders" is rejected.

Questions

- 1 The pastor, being the leading elder, leads the other elders into a decision during the elders' meeting. Can the other elders propose, suggest and initiate a decision? How free should the meeting be for a consensus of opinion to be arrived at? Does the size of the eldership affect the degree of freedom in the discussion?
- 2 Suggest the next course of action to take if the eldership cannot come to an agreement on any particular matter. Disagreement should seldom be encountered, both in the eldership or the church meetings. Why is this so?
- 3 Discuss the importance of: (a) the pastor, ruling elders, deacons and church members knowing their respective roles in the church; (b) the right men being appointed to office.

Eleven

The Gathered Church

(Matt. 13:24-30; 18:15-20)

The principle stated: A visible (local) church consists of believers in Christ who are baptised on a credible profession of faith, and voluntarily associated under special covenant, for the maintenance of worship, the truths, the ordinances, and the discipline, of the gospel.

The discussion on church government is not complete without a consideration of the subjects of government. There are officers appointed to rule, namely the elders. But who are the people being

ruled? Here, we come to an important principle that is upheld in Independency, namely, the principle of "the gathered church". The principle arises from a consideration of the *essence* of the church, which consists of two elements: the *matter* and the *form*.

11.1 The "Gathered Church"

1 **The matter:** The church is to be made up of true believers, who have a credible profession of faith and holiness of life. The obviously profane are excluded from Christ's kingdom (2 Timothy 3:1-5; 1 Corinthians 5:11-13), and those admitted are limited to the regenerate (John 3:3; Titus 3:3-5). Although God alone knows who are truly born of the Spirit (Acts 15:8; Revelation 2:23), the church is called upon to judge by the external life and profession of those who seek membership in the church of Jesus Christ (Acts 8:13, 18-24). What are the indications of a true faith in Christ?

(i) An understanding of the basic doctrines concerning the person and work of Christ (Mt. 16:15-19).

(ii) A professed submission to the authority of Christ

in the church, shown in practice by the individual undergoing baptism (Matthew 28:18-20).

(iii) Knowledge of, and consent to, the doctrine of self-denial and bearing of the cross (Matthew 10:37-39; Mark 8:34-38).

(iv) Conviction and confession of sin, with trust in Christ for deliverance (1 Peter 3:21).

(v) Regular attendance to the means of grace – the public worship and the hearing of preaching, and the private reading of Scripture and prayer (Hebrews 10:24-25; James 2:17-18).

(vi) A changed life, shown by love towards others and a careful avoidance of all known sins (1 Corinthians 10:32; Philippians 1:9-10).

2 The form: The church is made up of believers who come together by voluntary consent, who are bound together in covenant commitment, and agree to the exercise of church discipline.

(i) Voluntary consent arises from *the nature of discipleship*, which is voluntary (Matthew 28:20; 2 Corinthians 9:13). It arises also from *the headship of Christ*, which in turn leads to *the liberty of con-*

science. A believer's conscience is bound only by the law of Christ (2 Corinthians 1:24; 1 John 4:1).

(ii) Covenant commitment arises from the covenant theology of the Bible. From the beginning, God bound Himself to His people by covenant and His people bound themselves to God by covenant (2 Corinthians 6:16-18; 8:5; Hebrews 8:10). In the Old Testament time, the nation of Israel constantly renewed their covenant before God (Exodus 24:1-8; Deuteronomy 29:10-15; Ezra 10:3-5; Nehemiah 9:38).

(iii) Discipline is required in a church. In the case of an individual believer, faith is required of him in order that he may have the right or power to become a child of God (John 1:12). In the case of two or three believers, mutual consent must be added to individual faith before there can be the right to meet in Christ's name for mutual exhortation, instruction, admonition, and prayer (Matthew 18:19-20). For a group of believers to exist and function as a church, the mutual consent must be extended to cover more than mutual edification so that the discipline spoken of in Matthew 18:15-18 is possi-

ble.

- 3 From the above, it is clear that *the gathered church* is, in fact, *the visible (local) church* according to the definition of Independency. The principle of "the gathered church" states that a visible (local) church should consist of believers in Christ who are baptised on a credible profession of faith, and voluntarily associated under special covenant, for the maintenance of worship, the truths, the ordinances, and the discipline, of the gospel.
- 4 A church, when first founded, would need to make an *explicit covenant*. By that is meant that the people must gather together and affirm verbally the covenant of the church. All who are involved would have agreed upon a Constitution, a Confession Of Faith, and possibly also a Statement Of Faith, to be adopted by the church. At a prearranged time, the group gathers together to conduct an orderly service of worship, at which everyone would raise his right hand above the shoulder and read the covenant aloud together (cf. Ezra 10:19; Lamentation 5:6; Ezekiel 17:18). They then sign the membership book, on the first page of which is attached

a copy of the covenant.¹

11.2 Differences On The Principle

- 1 The principle of "the gathered church" is upheld in Congregationalism and Independency. Historically, those who upheld Independency consisted of two groups: the "Independents" who were paedobaptists, and the Particular Baptists who believed in the baptism of believers by immersion. Infant baptism, however, is contrary to the "gathered church" principle because infants are unable to fulfil the requisites of a credible profession of faith, holiness, separation and voluntary consent. Believer's baptism alone is consistent with the "gathered church" principle.
- 2 Episcopalians and Presbyterians are paedobaptists. They have developed a theology of infant baptism that revolves around the covenant that God made with Abraham (Genesis 17). In this paedobaptist theology, circumcision is wrongly identified with baptism, instead of with regeneration, as is taught

¹1 For more on church membership, and an example of the covenant of the church, see Poh, "A Multifaceted Jewel".

in the New Testament (e.g. Colossians 2:11-12). They have proposed the idea of a *visible universal church* to accommodate the practice of infant baptism. This idea is based on an incorrect understanding of the parable of the wheat and tares in Matthew 13. There, the field is the world, not the church. The parable teaches that the invisible church of Christ is made up of regenerate people only. By holding to infant baptism and the idea of a visible universal church, the principle of "the gathered church" is denied.

Questions

- 1 It is often argued that the churches in apostolic time readily baptised anyone who made a profession of faith, as happened on the day of Pentecost. Give reasons why this is not true.
- 2 Based on Matthew 18:15-20 and the definition of a church, what is the minimum number of people needed to form a local church? What if there are less than that number?

3 Many churches today do not have a covenant that is drawn up and subscribed to by the members verbally or in writing. It is assumed that whoever professes to be a Christian and comes regularly to the meetings of the church is a member. Are we to recognise such congregations, that have only an *implicit covenant*, as true churches?

Reference

- 1 Poh, Boon-Sing, 2020. A Multifaceted Jewel: Studies On The Local Church. Good News Enterprise.

Twelve

The Communion Of Churches (Acts 15:1-29)

The principle stated: Fellowship between churches arises from their spiritual union with Christ. Abstractly considered, communion consists in the execution of gospel duties by the individual churches. Practically considered, it is the mutual interaction of the churches to advance the cause of Christ and edify the universal church. Scripture shows that churches in a region should definitely associate together. Such an association has no power of jurisdiction over the member churches.

The principle of "the communion of churches" is recognised in Independency, and is worked out in its own unique way. It is wrong, therefore, to think that churches that hold to Independency are necessarily isolationist.

12.1 The Nature Of Communion

- 1 The communion of churches arises from their union with Christ, and therefore with one another. Just as a believer is indwelt by the Spirit of Christ (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), a local church is also indwelt by the Spirit of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Matthew 18:15-20). Communion is not of the essence of government. We are speaking of the fellowship between churches, not how a group of churches is governed.
- 2 There are two aspects to the communion of churches:
 - (i) Abstractly considered, it consists of the execution of gospel duties by the individual churches. As individual churches faithfully carry out their gospel duties, the communion of churches is being expressed. Conversely, no communion exists between

churches that are faithful and those that have departed from the truth.

(ii) Practically considered, it is the mutual interaction of churches to advance the cause of Christ and edify the whole catholic church. This is often called "inter-church fellowship".

3 It is practically impossible to fellowship with every church in the world. Of necessity, inter-church fellowship has to be practised selectively. It is not wrong to practise selective fellowship. The Lord Himself practised selective fellowship – He chose seventy to send out two by two; He chose twelve to be His apostles; He chose three apostles to be with Him on the Mount of Transfiguration and in the Garden of Gethsemane; and there was one known as "the disciple whom He loved".

Opportunities for fellowship with other churches may be left to providence, or it may be deliberately sought. The latter is more biblical (1 Samuel 2:30; Matthew 25:14-30; 1 Peter 2:17), and is expressed in the 1689 Confession of Faith, Chapter 26, paragraphs 14 and 15. Furthermore, Scripture gives us examples of how the early churches were associ-

ated regionally. We read of "the churches of Asia", "the churches of Macedonia", and "the churches of Galatia" (1 Corinthians 16:19; 2 Corinthians 8:1; Galatians 1:2). The *churches* (plural, 2 Corinthians 8:1, 19) in Macedonia contributed *a gift* (singular, v. 19) to the needy saints, and appointed *a brother* (singular, vs. 18, 19) to accompany the missionary team. The churches of Asia were used to receiving and sharing the same letters from the apostles (Colossians 4:16; Revelation 1:4ff.). The churches in Galatia also commended Timothy to Paul's missionary team (Acts 16:1-2). Then, there is the example of how the church of Antioch interacted with the one in Jerusalem, to resolve a problem (Acts 15).¹

- 4 Like-minded churches in a region should be associated in some ways. It is consistent with the spirit of

¹The so-called Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 has been appealed to by the Presbyterians and the Episcopalians in support of their forms of church government. The "council" was, in fact, a meeting of representatives of only two churches – those of Antioch and Jerusalem – to resolve a problem caused by some individuals from the Jerusalem church. No delegates from the other churches accompanied Paul and his colleagues to Jerusalem (v. 3). Furthermore, the decree issued by the council was not authoritative in nature, but constituted a declaration on the issue at stake (vs. 24-29).

the Scriptures and the examples of the churches in the New Testament. Many advantages accrue from churches associating together. Positively, mutual help and encouragement in gospel work is possible. Negatively speaking, there is recourse to put right what may be wrong in a member church, be it an error in doctrine or practice. There is some disagreement over the degree of association – whether it should be loose or whether it should be rules-based. Churches may hold combined church camps and/or conferences for their members, and messengers of the churches may meet at regular intervals for fellowship and discussion of common gospel endeavours. Messengers should predominantly be elders, led by the pastor, but may include other men approved by the churches.

- 5 Some churches are providentially more able to assist others or to be consulted by others, as was the case with the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:22; 15:2). A stronger church should ensure that its leadership in the association does not result in the affiliated churches playing only "second fiddle" all the time. Just as the responsibilities and liabilities

of associating together are shared out, so also the privileges and blessings are shared out. All these are to be done without intruding upon the autonomy and privacy of any church, and without any church feeling itself being imposed upon. The assembly of messengers has no power of jurisdiction over the member churches. It has only the power to advise, and persuade by means of the truths of Scripture.

12.2 Other Systems Of Connectionalism

- 1 The Presbyterian form of connectionalism consists of stated synods in a fixed combination of churches, with their officers placed in lesser or greater assemblies, and the synods arranged in subordination to one another. This form of connectionalism would have to be rejected on two grounds: firstly, it amounts to adding to the sufficient word of God, thereby breaching the Regulative Principle; secondly, it contradicts a clear teaching of Scripture, namely, the autonomy of the local church.

- 2 Episcopacy is similar to Presbyterianism in that there is an hierarchy of authority over the churches, although this time it is that of individuals and not of committees of individuals.
- 3 Congregationalism tends to either avoid connectionalism of any kind, or engage in connectionalism that is heavily organised. The latter variety of Congregational practice may appear to be similar to the connectionalism of Presbyterianism, but in reality they differ in two major ways: (i) Congregationalism insists on upholding the autonomy of the member churches, at least in theory; and (ii) there is more lay involvement than is found in Presbyterianism.
- 4 Reformed Baptists today are struggling to establish their ecclesiological identity. There is a need to recover the associational life of the early Particular Baptists.

Questions

- 1 Discuss the benefits of churches associating together with reference to: (i) missions and church-planting; (ii) the growing influence of the ecumenical movement; (iii) the persecution of Christians.
- 2 Most churches would agree to the principle of the communion of churches. In practice, however, the principle is often breached. What are some of the ways by which this happens?
- 3 What difficulties or inconveniences would there be if a regional association of churches covers too big an area, or includes too many churches in its membership? How may these be alleviated?

Thirteen

Conclusion

(1 Tim. 3:14-15; 2 Tim. 3:16-17)

We have discussed the principles that together give us the biblical form of church government. It remains now for us to compare the four forms of church government which have come down to us historically, in the light of those principles that we have drawn out from Scripture. Believing the Scripture to be authoritative, sufficient, and perspicuous, we hold to the view that there is a *jus divinum* form of church government – that is, one that has the divine sanction.

13.1 The Biblical Form Of Church Government

We summarise the principles of church government:

- 1 *Autonomy*: Each congregation is to be self-ruling. The power to rule itself has been communicated by Christ to the congregation. There is no individual, no body of individuals, and no institution (whether civil or ecclesiastical) outside the congregation that has the right or power to exert rule over that congregation.
- 2 *The Headship of Christ*: A church that recognises the headship of Christ will accept: (i) His prophethood, by acknowledging the Scripture as the sole authority in all matters of faith and practice, and the primacy of preaching in worship; (ii) His priesthood, by engaging in pure and acceptable worship, in which the Regulative Principle is carefully and wisely applied; (iii) His kingship, by governing itself in the way prescribed in the Scripture.
- 3 *Rule by Elders*: Biblically qualified men who are duly recognised and appointed by the congregation exercise rule over the congregation. The power of

rule resides with the church. The authority to exercise rule lies with the elders. That authority comes from Christ through the church.

- 4 *The Priority of the Ministry:* The ministry of God's word has the priority in the life of the church. Of the two sorts of elders, the teaching elders have the priority over the ruling elders. The teaching elders are the pastors, teachers, or ministers of the word. As far as possible, the pastor is to be supported full-time, to concentrate on prayer and the ministry of the word.
- 5 *The Validity of Ruling Elders:* Scripture teaches that there are two sorts of elders: teaching elders and ruling elders. The pastors exercise two sorts of duties – namely, teaching and ruling. The ruling elders exercise one sort of duty – namely, ruling. Ruling elders are needed not only to minimise the possibility of autocracy in the minister, on the one hand, and anarchy of the congregation, on the other, but also to help the pastor in the work of pastoral oversight.
- 6 *The Unity of the Eldership:* All pastors are elders, but not all elders are pastors. All elders are equal

only in the general sense that they occupy the same office of ruling. The eldership is quantitatively one in that all the elders, considered together, constitute one body that has the oversight of the church. The eldership is qualitatively one in that it should function as one body.

7 *Popular Election:* The appointment of office-bearers must involve the guidance of the existing elders and the consent of the congregation. The existing elders inform the church of the number of new office-bearers needed, the functions they are expected to perform, and the qualifications they must possess. The actual nomination and election of deacons are left to the congregation, under the oversight of the existing elders. In the appointment of new elders, the existing elders nominate the candidates while the congregation elects from among them.

8 *Ordination:* New office-bearers are to be ordained by the elders laying hands on them, with prayer. Fasting is also required in the case of the ordination of elders. Ordination has the meaning of separation, dedication, or consecration of the person

unto God. The purpose of ordination is to solemnly and publicly recognise, confirm, separate and dedicate the person in the office.

- 9 *Rule with Consent*: This is the practice whereby the elders seek the consent of the congregation as they exercise rule over the church. The consent is given implicitly in the case of preaching, teaching, and admonition. This is the "key of teaching (order)". It is given explicitly, often by a show of hands, in the decisions that affect the external circumstances of the whole church. This is the "key of ruling (jurisdiction)".
- 10 *The Gathered Church*: This principle requires that a visible (local) church consist of believers in Christ who are baptised on a credible profession of faith, and voluntarily associated under special covenant, for the maintenance of worship, the truths, the ordinances, and the discipline, of the gospel.
- 11 *The Communion of Churches*: Fellowship between churches arises from their spiritual union with Christ. Abstractly considered, communion consists in the execution of gospel duties by the individual churches. Practically considered, it is the mutual interaction

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of the churches to advance the cause of Christ and edify the whole universal church. The Scripture shows that like-minded churches in a region should definitely associate together. Such an association has no power of jurisdiction over the member churches.

	Episc	Presby	Indep	Congr
1. Autonomy	No	No	Yes	Yes
2. Headship of Christ	No	?	Yes	Yes
3. Rule by Elders	No	Yes	Yes	No
4. Priority of Ministry	No	Yes	Yes	No
5. Validity of Ruling Elders	No	?	Yes	No
6. Unity of Eldership	No	Yes	Yes	No
7. Popular Election	No	Yes	Yes	?
8. Ordination	No	?	Yes	?
9. Rule with Consent	No	No	Yes	Yes
10. Gathered Church	No	No	Yes	Yes
11. Communion of Chs.	No	No	Yes	?

Conclusion: We can see clearly that Independency is the biblical form of church government.

13.2 Churches Today

- 1 The Church of England, other Anglican churches, the Lutheran Church, and the Roman Catholic Church

are Episcopal. The Dutch Reformed Church and the Church of Scotland are Presbyterian. Most Presbyterian denominations are, by definition, Presbyterian in church government. Some Presbyterian churches are (surprisingly!) actually Independent in their church government.

- 2 The Methodist Church in Malaysia, following that in America, falls into the Episcopal system, since there is a bishop, a number of superintendents of the different regional groupings (or "conferences"), fanning down to the local pastors. The Methodist churches in Britain practise a form of Presbyterianism, in which there is no bishop.
- 3 The Evangelical Free Churches in Malaysia, which were founded by American missionaries, are Congregational. Those in Britain tend to be Independent. The General Baptist churches of today are mostly Congregational. The *Sidang Infil Borneo* (SIB, or Borneo Evangelical Church) in Malaysia is also Congregational, although it claims to practise "a modified form of Presbyterianism". Both the General Baptist and the SIB churches practise a strong connectionalism between the like-minded congre-

gations.

- 4 Most of the other independent (i.e. non-connect-
ional, or self-ruling) churches are Congregational
in the way they are governed. An executive com-
mittee, consisting of elected members of the church,
administers the church by a process of democratic
voting.
- 5 The Open Brethren churches would fall into the
category of Independency. Theirs is Independency
of the elementary kind – one devoid of the princi-
ples of "the priority of the ministry", "ordination",
"the gathered church", and the definite association
of churches. The priesthood of all believers is em-
phasised to such an extent that there is a denial
of the place of a full-time pastor, and preaching is
done by rotation between the leaders. Most Breth-
ren churches do not have a membership roll, and
covenant commitment is of the implicit kind, if ex-
istent.
- 6 The Reformed Baptist churches are Independent.
Some Reformed Baptist churches hold to the Ab-
solute Equality view of the eldership, which would
undermine the priority of the ministry, Ordination

is treated as optional by some. Most are struggling with the idea of forming regional associations of churches.

13.3 Some Closing Comments

- 1 Jesus Christ, as Head of the church, holds the offices of prophet, priest and king. The church that is truly submitted to Christ's headship will reflect His prophethood, priesthood, and kingship by having faithful preaching of His word, worship that is conformed to and regulated by the Scripture, and a church government that is biblical. Church government is not a matter of secondary importance.
- 2 Since Independency is the biblical form of church government, it will be the most suitable vessel for God to use in the furtherance of His cause on earth. The Particular Baptists were once known for their readiness to form local churches wherever they were scattered. This has been attributed largely to the tremendous freedom and flexibility of their church polity. Theirs was a freedom that was tempered by orderliness: an "orderly freedom", one might say. This contrasts greatly with the rigidity of Episco-

pacy and Presbyterianism on the one hand, and the chaos of fully-fledged Congregationalism on the other. Will Reformed Baptists be similarly used by God today to plant myriads of biblical churches across the globe?

- 3 The *form* is ordained to serve the *faith*. A correct form, without the true faith, is useless. Over and above form and substance, there must be *spiritual life*. Christ must be present by His Spirit in the church for it to be an instrument mighty in God, for pulling down strongholds. When we emphasise the importance of the form of church government, we do not minimise the importance of the faith, much less the importance of true spiritual vitality. How we must remain humble, faithful, and prayerful as a church!

Questions

- 1 "From church history, we learn that Christians have never been agreed over the form of church government. We should therefore not be dogmatic about the form of church government. We must agree to

disagree." Comment on this commonly heard sentiment.

- 2 What should a Christian do if he is convinced that Independency is the biblical form of church government while his church holds to a different form? What difficulties are there for a pastor who attempts to change the existing form of church government to one that is more biblical?
- 3 What wrong attitudes should we guard against in ourselves with regard to the form of church government?

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Other books by the same author:

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- 2 A GARDEN ENCLOSED: A Historical Study And Evaluation Of The Form Of Church Government Practised By The Particular Baptists In The 17th And 18th Centuries.
- 3 AGAINST PARITY: A Response To The Parity View Of The Church Eldership
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16 WHAT IS A REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH?

17 WORLD MISSIONS TODAY: A Theological, Exegetical, and Practical Perspective Of Missions