THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM

A STUDY ON THE BIBLICAL FORM OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

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WHAT IS A REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH?

THOROUGHGOING REFORMATION: What It Means To Be Truly Reformed

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM

A Study On The Biblical

Form Of Church Government

B S POH

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A Study On The Biblical Form Of Church Government

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This book is dedicated to

my dear wife, Good Cam (nicknamed *Goody*)

and our four sons

Yeh Han,

Yeh Tze,

Yeh Chuin,

and

Yeh Ern.

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PREFACE TO THIS EDITION

"The Keys of the Kingdom" was first published before the widespread use of the internet. The Tabernacle Bookshop in London must be thanked for its effort at disseminating the book. The review of the book by Dr. Peter Masters and its use as a textbook of the London Reformed Baptist Seminary (LRBS) have contributed in no small way to its wider dissemination. Others such as Pastor Earl Blackburn and the late Pastor David Fountain have similarly helped in their own ways.

A skeleton summary of "The Keys of the Kingdom", entitled "Independency: The Biblical Form of Church Government", was published in 1997 for use in Bible classes. This was followed by another booklet, entitled 'Against Parity: A Response to the "Parity" View of the Church Eldership', published in 2006. Another book, entitled "A Garden Enclosed", was published in 2013. While "The Keys of the Kingdom" is a biblical study on church government, "A Garden Enclosed" is a historical study on the form of church government practised by the Particular Baptists in the 17th and 18th centuries. These books are mentioned to alert the serious reader who desire to pursue the subject beyond "The Keys of the Kingdom". Otherwise, it is reckoned that "The Keys of the Kingdom" would be sufficient to help the Christian in his understanding on church government.

While not claiming that the last word has been written on the subject, it is the sincere desire of this writer for "The Keys of the Kingdom" to be used of God to establish many churches, pastors, and Christians. *Soli Deo gloria.*

B S Poh,
Kuala Lumpur, February 2017.

PREFACE

This book has taken more than three years to write. Research has been hampered by the absence of a good theological library in this part of the world. God has mercifully provided the basic books needed, revived the many bouts of flagging zeal to continue, and sustained the health needed to fulfill at the same time the many responsibilities in the church, in the family and in the wider ministry.

Thanks are due to the following people:

i Dr. Robert Oliver, for sending requested copies of research papers from theological journals, for helpful comments, and for polishing up my English.

ii Dr. Stuart Olyott, for permission to reproduce his article on church discipline as an appendix to this book.

iii Pastor Erroll Hulse, editor of Reformation Today, for permission to reproduce the example of an association covenant as an appendix to this book.

iv The individuals who have kindly lent me their books.

v The brother in Christ who contributed a Macintosh computer, without which the writing of this book would have been much more difficult.

vi All those who have prayed, and have patiently borne with the author's many shortcomings.

The author alone is to be held responsible for the contents of this book.

PREFACE

This book is sent forth with the prayer that truth will be widely published in the world, that many souls will be drawn closer to Christ, and that the name of the Triune God will be greatly glorified.

Boon-Sing Poh,
Kuala Lumpur, January 1995.

FOREWORD

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.

Is there a *jus divinum* (divinely ordained) form of church government – a system of government that is revealed in the Scripture? If the Bible is the sole authority in all matters of faith and practice, if it is sufficient and perspicuous (that is, capable of being clearly understood), there is a divinely ordained form of church government.

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.

Many Reformed Baptist churches have sprung up all over the world in these recent years. They face the common problem of having to struggle over their ecclesiological identity. Reformed writing on ecclesiology has been dominated by the Presbyterians. The early Particular Baptists, from whom the Reformed Baptists claim descent, were clear about their churchmanship. They shared the same form of church government as the paedobaptist Independents, of whom John Owen was the greatest exponent.

This book is an attempt to meet the perceived need of an up-to-date exposition on that form of church government known tradition-

ally as Independency. Independency and Congregationalism were at first interchangeable terms. Extreme Congregationalism was known from the early years of the seventeenth century, in which democratical rule was practised. By the middle years of that century, John Owen was already dissociating himself from such extreme Congregationalism. Towards the end of the century, the term "Congregational" was used more to described the idea that the church is ruled by the people, while the term "Independent" meant more the idea that the church is autonomous.

Today four basic forms of church government are discernible: Episcopacy or Prelacy, Presbyterianism, Independency, and Congregationalism. Episcopacy is characterised by an hierarchy of individuals in the power structure of the denomination, fanning down from one individual at the top. Presbyterianism is characterised by an hierarchy of committees of individuals forming a gradation of church courts, and the churches being ruled by elders. Independency is characterised by the autonomy of the local church, and rule being exercised by elders but with congregational consent. Congregationalism is characterised by the autonomy of the local church, and rule being exercised by the congregation, through a process of democratic voting to get a consensus.

In this book, eleven principles of church government are expounded in detail. They include: 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. These eleven principles together define for us the *jus divinum* (divinely sanctioned) form of church government. The four forms of church government that have come down to us historically are examined in the light of these eleven principles. Independency, as practised by the early Particular Baptists, is found to be the biblical form of church government.

Throughout, an approach that is as objective as possible is adopted. Wherever possible, the sources of information are indicated. An attempt has been made to prevent the style of writing from becoming excessively academic. The reader will have to pardon the author if, at places, the preacher in him shows. The book is aimed at the Christians and church leaders who are engaged in the down-to-earth task

of serving the Lord in this world. It is hoped that it will also serve as a manual for church officers and a textbook in seminaries.

One

INTRODUCTION

The revival of interest in Reformed teaching since the early 1960s has brought about the recovery of many important biblical doctrines. Some of these are the sovereignty of God, the sole authority of Scripture in all matters of faith and practice, salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, the centrality and uniqueness of the local church, and the primacy of preaching. These doctrines have either been neglected or distorted among evangelicals at large. Nevertheless, these were the truths mightily owned by God in the past and loved by earlier generations of Christians.

The re-emphasis of these doctrines has brought a new lease of life for the older Calvinistic churches, and has led to the founding of newer fellowships. Numerically speaking, Presbyterians and Baptists have benefited most from this recovery of Reformed teaching. Most of the latter have not hesitated to be known as "Reformed Baptists", holding to the 1689 Particular Baptist Confession of Faith as the doctrinal basis of their churches. Reformed Baptists may claim justly that they are true heirs of the Reformation of the 16th century and the lineal descendants of the Particular Baptists of the I7th century Puritan era. After all, lineage in terms of belief is what matters, and not ecclesiastical pedigree or historical succession.

Amidst apparent growth and unity among the Reformed Baptists there have arisen differences in ecclesiology (that is, the doctrine of the church). There are also differences in other doctrines. For example, in eschatology (the doctrine of the last things), there are differ-

ences over premillennialism, postmillennialism, amillennialism, or dispensationalism. Then there are the issues of whether the moral law is still relevant for the Christian, whether the Lord's Supper and church membership should be open to all. There is also the debate as to whether Reformed Baptists arose during the 17th century or are descendants of an unbroken line of "Baptists" stemming from the Anabaptists, the Waldensians, the Donatists, and all the way from the time of the apostles. Even the title "Reformed Baptist" has been called in question.

Some of these differences are relatively minor, and should not be enough to agitate or disrupt the unity of the Reformed Baptist constituency. Other matters are of greater importance. Failure to adhere to them would lead to the church concerned being frowned upon rightly not only by other Reformed Baptists but also by the wider conservative circles of churches. It is to be noted that one can hold to too little, or to too much, to qualify as a "Reformed Baptist". The two boundaries are not necessarily co-extensive. Where one boundary begins and the other ends is, of course, a matter of debate.

It is probable that Reformed Baptists are generally clear about soteriology (that is, the doctrine of salvation). To a man they are Calvinists, holding to the well-known "Five Points of Calvinism", often known as the doctrines of grace. Few would hedge as a "Four-pointer" or a "Four-and-a-half-pointer".[1] Nevertheless, while being clear on soteriology there is, unhappily, no equal clarity in the realm of ecclesiology. A general acceptance of believer's baptism and the autonomy of the local church is about all that may be said with certainty about Reformed Baptist churchmanship.

1.1 The Reformed Baptist Dilemma

Obviously, believer's baptism and church autonomy alone are not sufficient constituents for a Reformed Baptist ecclesiology. The Ply-

[1] Some claim themselves to be Calvinists but reject the doctrine of "particular redemption" (also known as "definite atonement"), one of the "five points" of historic Calvinism. These people can be termed, with no disrespect intended, as "four-pointers". Others claim that Christ's death was intended for every individual in the world but that only the elect are saved. These are the "four-and-a-half-pointers". They usually camouflage their truncated doctrine with the oft-quoted cliche that Christ's death was "sufficient for all but efficient for some".

mouth Brethren and the Evangelical Free Churches are at one with us here, and yet are hardly Baptists, although they are *baptistic*. Moreover, a closer scrutiny of the ecclesiology of the General Baptists, Arminian in soteriology, will reveal elements which the Reformed Baptists would hesitate to own. If we claim to be the spiritual descendants of the early Particular Baptists we need to rediscover their ecclesiology. If biblical, we would want to adopt it.

Surprisingly, this is what Reformed Baptists have left undone. While attempts have been made since the 1970s to work out an ecclesiology of sorts,[2] no attempt seems to have been made to determine the ecclesiology of the early Particular Baptists. It is true that certain aspects of the church life of that period have been researched, but such research has remained for the most part in academic circles without filtering out to the churches.[3] An attempt has been made in recent years to understand the inter-church life of the period,[4] but this is only one aspect of Particular Baptist ecclesiology.

As we survey the world scene, we find some Reformed Baptist churches practising the fully-fledged Congregationalism of the free, or independent or non-connectional, churches. Office-bearers are appointed, not to rule the church, but to carry out the various functions agreed upon by the church. Decision making is achieved by a vote mechanism which aims at a consensus of opinion. The power and authority to rule the church lies with the congregation, and not with the elders. Many Baptists eschew the word "democracy", preferring instead "christocracy", as a description of their system of church government.[5] In practice, however, theirs is no different from the humanistic democracy that is summarised by Abraham Lincoln's watchword, "government of the people, by the people, and for the people".

Then there are churches which practise "rule by elders" without the necessity of congregational consent. This is a reaction to chaotic

[2] A series of articles appeared in the magazine *Reformation Today* (editor, Erroll Hulse) in the 1970s.

[3] The late B. R. White, lecturer in church history at Regent's Park College, Oxford, together with a few others, have researched in considerable detail the ecclesiology of the Particular Baptists.

[4] See RT 103, 104.

[5] EDT, pp.122-124.

Congregational practice on the one hand and, on the other, because of a desire to follow what is perceived to be biblical teaching. After all, the New Testament teaches that elders are to *rule* (so, 1 Tim. 5:17)! "Rule by elders" without congregational consent is virtually a Presbyterian practice – a practice which we beg leave to question.

Other churches, some of them influential, believe in the "equality of elders" and carry this to an extreme, calling every elder "pastor". Closer scrutiny will reveal a strong Presbyterian influence in this system. By adopting the principle, but lacking the Presbyterian safeguard of the special position of the ordained minister, weaker churches flounder either from lack of clear leadership of a pastor or from an unhealthy competition for leadership among the elders.

Yet others advocate a connectionalism among Reformed Baptist churches that is akin to the "gradation of church courts" of the Presbyterians. True, some churches operate in isolation from others, resulting in unnecessary duplication of gospel efforts and, worse, actions which affect other churches adversely. However, this does not warrant an adoption of Presbyterianism as an over-reaction. But is the connectionalism of the Presbyterians biblical? Was there not a clear biblical practice known to the early Particular Baptists, a practice which we should adopt? Reactionism often leads to hasty and biased conclusions which are less than biblical. Once they have been adopted, the person or church concerned will find it that much harder to admit their deficiency, let alone discard them at a later date.

On the fringes of the Reformed Baptist constituency there are Baptists who have come to a Calvinistic soteriology but are still laden with beliefs and practices carried over from earlier days.[6] Such people and churches can be recognised by one or more of the following characteristics:

i A reluctance to call themselves "Reformed Baptists", preferring the term "Sovereign Grace Baptist" as an appellation for themselves. This is more so in America than in Britain. In Britain the term "Sovereign Grace" was in the past associated with hyper-Calvinistic churches.[7]

[6] See, for example, K. H. Good.

[7] I. H. Murray, *The Fight of Faith*, p. 234. [The Sovereign Grace Baptist Churches should not be confused with the Charismatic grouping called Sovereign Grace

ii A view which traces historical lineage backwards along the line of churches holding to Baptist principles to the time of the apostles, bypassing the apostate church of Rome.

iii A lack of patience and sympathy with Presbyterians who alone, it is claimed, are the spiritual descendants of the Reformers and the Puritans.

iv Identification with the Anabaptists in their ecclesiology which, it is claimed, is Congregational.

v A denial of the abiding relevance of the moral law, and especially the Fourth Commandment, in this age of grace.

vi A preference for the First London Baptist Confession of Faith (issued in 1644 and republished with an appendix in 1646) to the Second London Baptist Confession (issued in 1677 and reaffirmed in 1689), claiming that the earlier confession is a truer reflection of the beliefs of the Particular Baptists.[8]

vii Adherence to dispensational premillennialism of one sort or another.

These Baptists enjoy a closer affinity with Reformed Baptists than with Arminian Baptists mainly because of their common soteriology. This affinity, however, has led to some confusion among some newly-founded Reformed Baptist churches together with not a few older ones. Some, in reaction to problems arising from Reformed Baptist churches influenced by Presbyterianism in one form or another, are attracted to the opinions of these "Sovereign Grace" Baptists.

Added to this plethora of opinions and problems is the fact that Independency and Congregationalism have historically been confounded as similar systems of church government. On the one hand, Reformed Baptists neither subscribe to the Presbyterian concept of

Churches, formerly known as People of Destiny International, then Sovereign Grace Ministries, before the change to its present name in 2014. These churches hold to non-cessationism and contemporary worship, combined with believer's baptism, Calvinistic soteriology, and Presbyterian church polity. Other terms that have been used include "Reformed Charismatics" and "New Calvinists".]

[8]Richard P. Belcher and Tony Mattia, *A Discussion*.

an hierarchy of church courts, nor do they endorse the Congregational idea of "rule by the congregation". On the other hand, they share with the Presbyterians the principle of "rule by elders", and with the Congregationalists the principle of the autonomy of the local church. Reformed Baptists seem to hold to a system of church government which lies between Presbyterianism and Congregationalism. We need to ask, what system is it to which the Reformed Baptists hold?

With the recovery of the Reformed Faith in the early 1960s Reformed Presbyterians have been actively disseminating books which expound both the Presbyterian form of church government and infant baptism. Seminary professors have been engaged actively in converting their Baptist students to Presbyterians. True, there are the more generous and big-hearted Presbyterians who are able to "live-and-let-live". But what are Reformed Baptists to do when faced with militant Presbyterianism? Baptist books on baptism are many, and they are beginning to be made available to the public. But what about a distinctive Reformed Baptist ecclesiology? Reformed Baptists have had to employ Presbyterian literature even in their own seminaries! While the more discerning are able to pick out what is right and good and to reject what is nothing but sheer Presbyterianism, there are clear indications that the less discerning have stumbled.

The uninitiated will throw up his hand in despair when first confronted with this vast spectrum of differences. The situation is truly a sea of confusion! Nevertheless, by standing back and scanning the whole scene before us, we would notice that the problem is basically a lack of clarity in the realm of ecclesiology. More particularly, the difficulty lies in the need to identify the differences and similarities between the different *forms of church government*. Ecclesiology, then, is not a subject of no significance to Reformed Baptists today.

1.2 Four Forms Of Church Government

Ecclesiology is in itself a broad discipline, embracing all aspects of the doctrine of the church. Of practical concern to Reformed Baptist churches is *church polity*, that is, the manner by which a church is organised and run. Together, the principles which undergird and

determine the way by which a church is administered constitute a system, or form, of government. We need to be clear about the various *forms of church government* which have evolved through the centuries in order to steer our way through the present confused situation.

It has been usual to classify various forms of church government in three basic categories. Prelacy (or Episcopacy), Independency (or Congregationalism), and Presbyterianism. There are those who posit a fourth category, the system practised by the Roman Catholic Church.[9] However, this is attempted simply to expose the Roman insistence on universal papal supremacy. For our purposes we would maintain that the Romish system is no more than the logical development of Prelacy.

My thesis is that there are four basic forms of church government: Prelacy, Presbyterianism, Independency, and Congregationalism. It is simplistic to sweep all who are neither Prelatists nor Presbyterians into just one category, that of the Independents or Congregationalists. It would be like classifying cows as Cows, dogs as Dogs, but cats and mice together as Cats. The differences between Independency and Congregationalism are glaring enough to warrant recognising them as differing forms of church government.

This is particularly true of today's church scene, in which Congregationalism as practised by most churches is characterised by the "democratic principle", whereas those churches that are Independent (and, therefore, supposedly Congregational as well) are characterised by the "rule of elders". There are also indications that, historically, there were clear differences between Independency and Congregationalism. However, in all the literature which discusses church polity, the two are effectively confounded.

Some definitions are in order:

Prelacy is that form of church government characteristic of the so-called Catholic Church (including, among others, the Church of England, the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches, the Orthodox Coptic Church in Egypt, the Lutheran Church, and the Roman Church).[10] It is maintained that there are three offices, those of the bishop, of the priest (or presbyter), and of the deacon. As noted, this system has been developed by the Roman communion as a papal hierar-

[9] J. Bannerman, Vol. 2, p. 245.

chy. Apart from the Church of England and the Lutheran Church, both emerging in the time of the Reformation, all the other churches have a species of pope (or patriarch) at the apex of their hierarchies. Nevertheless, in spite of the different titles used, all these churches share the same basic system of church government. Prelacy may be traced back historically to its elementary beginning in the middle of the second century, but no farther.[11]

Presbyterianism is that form of church government which is administered by presbyters or elders who are met in session, presbytery, synod, or general assembly. In other words, instead of an hierarchy of individuals as in Prelacy, there is an hierarchy of *committees* of individuals. This system is practised by the Dutch Reformed Church, the Church of Scotland and the many Presbyterian denominations in all parts of the world. Presbyterians are wont to assert the antiquity of their system of church government by appealing to the fact that the earliest churches were "clearly presbyterial".[11] By this is meant that the earliest churches, as far as may be determined from history, were ruled by elders or presbyters. Since "rule by elders" is also practised in Independency, both Presbyterianism and Independency unite in denying Prelacy its claim to antiquity. The rightful claimant to antiquity, whether Presbyterianism or Independency, must be determined by some other criterion.

Independency is that form of church government which maintains that each separate congregation is under Christ, is subject to no external jurisdiction whatever, and possesses within itself (that is, in its office-bearers and members) all the essential materials of government.[12] The elders rule the church in such a way as to involve the consent of the congregation. This system was practised both by the Particular Baptists and the Independents. Research has indicated that Independency was the practice of the churches immediately after the apostolic period. This fact has been conceded by men who did not themselves profess adherence to the principles of Independency. William Cunningham states that:

[10]We limit ourselves here to examples of churches which were in existence during, and immediately after, the Reformation.

[11]W. Cunningham, Vol. 1, p. 256.

[11]W. Cunningham, Vol. 1, p. 256.

[12]This is the definition given by the Presbyterian, Thomas Witherow, in his book, *The Apostolic Church – Which Is It?*, p. 14.

> "These eminent men have, more or less fully and explicitly, asserted, that, for the first century at least, each congregation – that is, the whole members of it, and not merely its office-bearers – transacted in common the whole of the ordinary necessary ecclesiastical business, including the exercise of discipline, and that each congregation was wholly independent of every other, and subject to no control from any party beyond or without itself ."[13]

Congregationalism is that form of church government which maintains that each congregation is ruled by the people. A consensus of opinion of the members is needed in decision making. The office-bearers are appointed by the church members to carry out functions agreed by the congregation, rather than to "rule" in the biblical sense. Often confused with Independency, Congregationalism traces its origin from the Anabaptists and other persecuted groups at the close of the medieval period. Since Independency was more the system practised by churches during, and immediately after, the time of the apostles, we should view Congregationalism as a deviation in one direction, just as Prelacy was a deviation in *another* direction. Since Independency and Congregationalism were regarded as identical during and after the Reformation, churches that were in actuality Congregational were considered as extremists among the Independents or Congregationalists.

These definitions do not presume to describe completely the various forms of church government. But they might be good enough for our present purpose. A fuller picture of the various systems will emerge by and by. For the moment our concern is to demonstrate that Independency must be distinguished from Congregationalism. The question naturally arises, *How did it come about that Independency and Congregationalism were confused and confounded as one and the same?* The answer must be sought in church history. Just as with the doctrine of salvation, the biblical form of church government had long been distorted and forgotten until the Reformation period.

[13]W. Cunningham, Vol. 2, pp. 549-550.

1.3 Historical Development

During the Reformation of the sixteenth century in Europe, two great movements emerged to oppose the apostate Roman Catholic Church: the “Magisterial Reformation” and the “Radical Reformation”. The former was led by men such as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. It has been defined as “Magisterial” because of the belief that it was right to engage the help of the civil magistrate in the furtherance of religion. Church and state were practically coextensive. All citizens of a territory, except those who had been excommunicated, were held to be members of the established territorial church. Infant baptism was practised. The churches which grew in this way, such as the Reformed (that is, the Zwinglian and Calvinist) churches in Switzerland, France, Holland and Scotland were Presbyterian in their form of church government. The Lutheran churches in Germany and Scandinavia, as well as the Church of England, emerged as Prelatic churches.

There was another development within the Reformation period. This widespread, transnational movement was discounted and condemned by the mainline Reformers. In recent times it has been termed the “Radical Reformation”. Its many adherents carried biblical, and Reformation, principles to their logical conclusions. The stifling influence of ecclesiastical tradition and imposed magisterial authority were renounced. Scripture alone was the only authority for defining faith and practice.

These Radicals believed that the Bible does not teach infant baptism and, therefore, discarded the practice. For such people the New Testament churches were communities of individuals who had been transformed by the Holy Spirit in an experience of grace. Baptism became "the symbol and seal of the faith of the regenerated". Church and state were seen as two quite different institutions, although both had been ordained by God. Each had its own sphere of jurisdiction exclusive of the other. Civil magistrates may, therefore, not be employed in the furtherance of the welfare of the church. The churches include only voluntary followers of Christ, and admission was by a confession of faith in baptism. Such churches were to be autonomous and would maintain their spiritual purity by employing internal discipline. For these beliefs, revolutionary in their time, the “Anabaptists” (that is, “rebaptisers”), as they were called, were

despised and persecuted by Protestant states as well as by Rome.[14]

1.3.1 Independency in France

In France, Reformation principles never received widespread support. The reforming efforts of Jacobus Faber, also known as Jacques Lefevre d'Etaples (circa 1455-1536), however, were not in vain. His interview with John Calvin at the time of Calvin's conversion in 1534 might have been instrumental in the latter's break with Rome.[15] Calvinists formed a congregation in Paris in 1555. When a national synod convened in Paris in 1559, over seventy churches were represented.[16]

No definitive statement concerning the Independent form of church government emerged until Morellius's teaching agitated the Reformed Church of France. J. B. Morellius, or Morely, believed that power over all ecclesiastical matters, whether decisions about points of doctrine, or the election and deposition of ministers, excommunication or re-admission of church members, or lay preaching, resides with the people. Morellius's work on the subject, "Traicte de la Discipline et Police Chretienne", was published at Lyons in 1561. It was condemned by the National Synod at Orleans in 1562, and again at Nismes in I572.[17] This highlights the seriousness with which the Presbyterians looked upon the threat of Morellius's teaching!

Morellius's teaching was embraced also by the celebrated philosopher Peter Ramus (1515-1572).[18] The persecution of Huguenots (as the Calvinistic Protestants were called) in France by the Roman Catholics culminated in the shameless massacre of St Bartholomew's Day, 1572, when two thousand were murdered in Paris and twenty thousand in the rest of France.[19] Among those who perished was Ramus. Civil strife continued for many more years, during which time large numbers of Huguenots left for Switzerland, Holland, Brandenburg, Britain and other countries.[20]

[14] W. L. Lumpkin, p. 13.
[15] NIDCC, p. 367.
[16] HC, pp. 380, 420, 421.
[17] W. Cunningham, pp. 372, 543.
[18] W. Cunningham, Vol. 2, p. 548.
[19] A. M. Renwick, p. 124.
[20] E. H. Broadbent, p. 232.

1.3.2 Separatists in England

In England the welfare of the church was largely determined by the political fortunes of the time. It swung back and forth between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, depending on who was on the throne. During the long reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603), however, Protestantism was firmly established. The Reformers within the Anglican Church became known as Puritans, and continued to press for further reform. They sought to bring their communion to a position resembling that of Calvin's city-church in Geneva. They believed in the Presbyterian form of church government, in which elders rule through presbyteries and synods. They also wanted to abolish religious ceremonies thought to be remnants from Roman Catholicism. Such included the wearing of vestments by the clergy, liturgical prayer, the sign of the cross at baptism, and kneeling at the Lord's Table.

Among their leaders were Thomas Cartwright (1535-1603) and William Perkins (1558-1602).

Elizabeth I, and then King James I, were unwilling to allow changes along Puritan lines. In the face of much discouragement a small separatist movement grew up alongside the main Puritan group. The Separatists were led by Robert Browne (circa 1550-1633) and Robert Harrison (died circa 1585). These men and their followers, often called "Brownists", formed an independent congregation at Norwich in 1581. Browne acted as pastor and Harrison as teacher of the church. Browne's teaching must have found a ready reception among the many Dutch Anabaptists who had settled in Britain. Sir Walter Raleigh stated in parliament that there were thousands of Brownists at that time. Two books published by Browne in 1582, "A Book Which Shows The Life And Manners Of All True Christians, And How Unlike They Are Unto The Turks And Papists And Heathen Folk", and "A Treatise Of Reformaiion Without Tarrying For Any", exercised a great influence.[21]

The church polity of the Brownists was basically Independency in its infancy, akin to what was taught by Morellius.[18] The English government and bishops lost all patience, and severely repressed the Brownists by imprisonment and by harassment, and by driving them away to the Netherlands. Browne and Harrison took their small flock

[21] E. H. Broadbent, pp. 239-240.

to Middelburg, in Zeeland (a province in the Netherlands), where it survived for a few years. Browne, however, returned to England, where he eventually broke down in mind and body. He renounced his separatism, and resumed ministry in the Church of England.

Separatist ideas, however, did not cease. By 1587 or 1588 a Separatist congregation appeared in London. Two leaders of the young church, Henry Barrow and John Greenwood, had been imprisoned in 1586. In 1589 Barrow sent from prison a simple church creed called "A True Description Out Of The Word Of God, Of The Visible Church". The church was defined as a company of believers united in fellowship to Christ and to one another. The church officers, elected by the congregation, were said to be the pastor, teacher, elder, deacons and widows. Administration of the church was to be placed in the hands of elders. These men were set above their brethren as virtually a ruling oligarchy. The creed did not concern itself with doctrinal matters since the congregation was already of one mind in holding Calvinistic views.[22]

1.3.3 Separatists in Holland

The Separatist congregation in London chose Francis Johnson as its pastor. John Greenwood, out of prison temporarily, was elected teacher. Two elders and two deacons were chosen. Both Johnson and Greenwood were arrested in December, 1592. Within the next year, fifty-six members of the church were also imprisoned. Other dissenters emigrated to Holland, where the church re-gathered in 1595, and came to be known as the "Ancient Church" with Henry Ainsworth as the pastor. At this stage a section of the church was still in London, although its main strength was concentrated in Amsterdam.

Desiring to make clear its doctrinal position and ecclesiology, the church prepared in 1596 a new creed, the shortened title of which was "A True Confession". Its Calvinism was typical of that of the Puritans. Its polity, far more detailed than that of "A True Description", and making a real development in an appreciation of Independent principles, shows that its authors had worked out many practical questions since 1589. Of interest to us is the fact that the seven

[18] W. Cunningham, Vol. 2, p. 548.
[22] W. L. Lumpkin, p. 80.

Particular Baptist churches of London used this confession as their model when they drew up their own, earliest, confession in 1644.[23]

Another Separatist congregation arose in 1606 or 1607. For purposes of convenience and safety the church divided into two groups which met separately. One group met at Scrooby under the leadership of Richard Clifton, and later that of John Robinson. The other met at Gainsborough, having as its pastor John Smyth. When severe persecution threatened the church the two groups fled to the Netherlands. This was in 1608. In Amsterdam they came across Johnson's "Ancient Church". The group led by John Smyth did not unite with this existing church, preferring to maintain its own identity. The company under Clifton may have joined the Johnson church for a short while, but around the end of April, 1609 most of this company moved on to Leyden under the leadership of John Robinson.

In 1620 a part of this Robinson's congregation sailed to America in the "Mayflower", and came to be known as the Pilgrim Fathers of America. They founded the Plymouth colony. Robinson himself never emigrated, choosing rather to remain as pastor of the major portion of the church in Holland. His influence on the Plymouth Separatists was profound because of his teaching before the voyage, his tracts and letters to the flock, and his guidance of William Brewster as their spiritual adviser in New England.[24]

In Holland, controversy developed among the several groups of Englishmen. Influenced by the Mennonites, Smyth forsook infant baptism and adopted that of believers. Unfortunately, he also accommodated himself to the peculiar christology of the Mennonites. This taught that when Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary He received flesh which had been created previously in heaven. Smyth also forsook the doctrine of justification by faith as understood by the Reformers, and replaced it, not with the Arminianism of the Mennonites, but with the Roman Catholic synthesis between justification and sanctification.[25]

[23] W. L. Lumpkin, pp. 79-81.
[24] NIDCC, p. 852.
[25] T. J. Nettles, pp. 13-72.

1.3.4 Baptists in England

Smyth's serious departure from orthodoxy caused Thomas Helwys and several others to separate from him. They returned to London in 1612 to establish the first Baptist church in England. Helwys died in prison in 1616 and was succeeded by John Murton. By 1630 there were six congregations. Seeking fellowship, they corresponded with the Mennonites in the Netherlands.[26] The General Baptists, so-called because of their affirmation of general atonement, continued to multiply through the subsequent centuries, although ravaged by lamentable apostasy and internal strife. The original General Baptist group fell almost entirely into Socinianism in the eighteenth century.[27] Its few remaining evangelical churches were absorbed into a new denomination, "The General Baptist New Connexion", which arose from a group of Arminian converts of the Great Awakening who adopted Baptist views. By the end of the nineteenth century Liberalism and political involvement robbed them of spirituality.[25]

A few years after Helwys founded the first Baptist church in London, Henry Jacob (1563-1624), an associate of John Robinson, returned to that city to form a Separatist church.[28] This congregation, founded in 1616, came to be named after its three pastors: Jacob, Lathrop and Jessey. From this congregation arose the first English Particular Baptist church. This was at some time between 1633 and 1638. Its first pastor was John Spilsbury (1593-1668). Having adopted the principle of believer's baptism in 1638, the people affirmed immersion as the correct mode. This was in 1641. From the family of congregations which grew from that founded by Henry Jacob in 1616 came a number of other Particular Baptist leaders, including William Kiffin, Thomas Sheppard, Thomas Munden and Thomas Killcop. Other Particular Baptist pastors also had links with various Independent congregations in London.[29]

As the Baptist congregations grew in number and prominence

[26] E. Hulse, *An Introduction To The Baptists*, p. 25.

[27] Socinianism was a movement founded by Socinus, who denied the Trinity, the deity of Christ, His work on the cross, and that men are fallen. These are the very truths denied in Islam, except that Socinianism appeared in a Christian garb.

[25] T. J. Nettles, pp. 13-72.

[28] E. H. Broadbent, p. 245.

[29] B. R. White, *The Doctrine of the Church*, p. 572.

it was perhaps inevitable that numerous false accusations were levelled at them. They were charged with being Anabaptists. The reason for this was to insinuate quite deliberately that these English dissenters were extremists just like the fanatics who had been involved in the tragic events at Münster in 1533-36.[30] It implied, too, that they were Armmian in doctrine and anti-establishment in their attitude to the state.

The consequence was that the Particular Baptists found it necessary to defend themselves against such false accusations and to distant themselves from the beliefs of the General Baptists. In 1644 the seven existing congregations in London issued a confession signed by fifteen men. This went a long way in clearing misrepresentation of the Particular Baptists and allaying distrust against them. As has been mentioned, this confession was based on the 1596 Confession of the English Separatists settled in Amsterdam.

Before proceeding any further, it would be helpful to discuss the difference in church order between the Particular Baptists and the General Baptists. While the Particular Baptists were mostly clear-cut Independents, the General Baptists vacillated between Congregationalism and Independency. This was very similar to the position of the Anabaptists, to which the General Baptists were closely associated. The Orthodox Creed, which was produced by the General Baptists in 1678, actually states, in Article 30, that the marks of a true church include "discipline and government duly executed, by ministers or pastors of God's appointing, and the church's election,..."[31] This would fit more into Independency than into Congregationalism. It is known, however, that many General Baptists were not practising the same church order as the Particular Baptists at the time of Isaac Watts (1674-1748).[32]

The swing to outright Congregationalism became obvious in the General Baptists of the New Connexion, after the revival of the eigh-

[30] In Münster, fanatics anticipated the second coming of the Lord by setting up a Christian commonwealth. They saw this as the location of the New Jerusalem. Soon polygamy appeared, and sins punishable by death included blasphemy, seditious language, scolding one's parents, backbiting, spreading scandal, and complaining. When government forces later attacked the Münsterites, they put up a fight, resulting in many being killed and others captured and executed.

[31] W. L. Lumpkin, p. 319.

[32] D. Fountain, p. 104. Quoted from T. Milner, pp. 193-198.

teenth century. They believed that the authority to rule lies with the congregation, and not with the elders. This is clear from the following description of their position at that time:

> "The churches composing the New Connection of General Baptists were, in their discipline, strictly congregational... They believed that each society was competent to manage its own concerns; and allowed of no foreign control, not even from their own conferences or association. The executive power of a church, they conceived to be lodged in the members regularly assembled. ...And, while they disclaimed all external authority, they were equally jealous of undue internal influence: holding their rights as church members sacred against the encroachment of their own officers."[33]

In America, Edward Hiscox published his book, “The New Directory For Baptist Churches”, in 1894. This book was of considerable influence over the Baptists in the subsequent years. Although a Calvinist, Hiscox actually advocated the Congregational form of church government. Describing the government of the church, he wrote:

> “The government is administered by the body acting together, where no one possesses a preeminence, but all enjoy an equality of rights; and in deciding matters of opinion, the majority bears rule. The pastor exercises only such control over the body as his official and personal influence may allow, as their teacher and leader and the expounder of the great Lawgiver’s enactments. His influence is paramount, but not his authority. In the decision of questions he has but his single vote. His rule is in the moral force ol his counsels, his instruction and guidance in matters of truth and duty, and also in wisely directing the assemblies whether for worship or business. Much less have the deacons any authoritative or dictatorial control over the church affairs. Matters of

[33] A. C. Underwood, p. 159.

> administration are submitted to the body and by them decided."[34]

Today, General Baptists all over the world would not hesitate to own Congregationalism as their form of church government. Theirs is a Congregationalism that is distinct from Independency, in which is emphasised the equal rights and privileges of the members, the priesthood of all believers, and the principle of "rule by the congregation". The Malaysia Baptist Convention, which is affiliated to the Southern Baptist Convention in America, holds to the view that:

> "The Baptist church is one of the world's most democratic organizations, using congregational democracy in executing church affairs."[35]

1.3.5 Puritan Independents

The Episcopal (or Prelatic) form of church government was retained in the Church of England throughout the reigns of Elizabeth I, James I (1603-25) and Charles I (1625-49). The Church of Scotland had been Presbyterian ever since John Knox introduced reforms there after his return from Geneva in 1559. Within the Puritan movement there developed a powerful body of opinion espousing and advocating the principles of Independency. During the ascendancy of William Laud, who was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury by Charles I in 1633, several men who adopted this persuasion were forced to leave the country. Some found refuge in Holland where they ministered to English expatriate congregations, while others crossed the Atlantic and founded the New England community. Unlike the Pilgrim Fathers, who were never anything other than Separatists, these latter emigrants came from mainstream establishment Puritanism. With undue optimism they had hoped that their national church could be reformed from within; in the event, they were sadly disappointed This was because their concept of church government was basically the same as that of the formal Separatists. Since England was totally incapable of endorsing a Separatist national church they had to go. Their views were embodied in "The

[34] E. T. Hiscox, pp. 144-145.
[35] *Baptist Handbook*, pp. 50-51, 78-80.

Cambridge Platform" of 1648, to which John Cotton (1585-1657) added a preface.[36]

The English civil war began in 1642, and lasted until 1646. Charles I was eventually beheaded. England and Scotland bound themselves to each other in a civil and religious bond called "the Solemn League and Covenant", and the Commonwealth was established under the guidance of Oliver Cromwell. The Westminster Assembly met in 1643 to draw up a confession of faith for the nation. The divines who met at this assembly came from all over Scotland and England. They were mostly Presbyterians. Some were Anglicans, while a few were Independents. The strict Presbyterians, especially those from Scotland, wanted the Presbyterian model of government to be imposed on every parish in the nation, with no toleration allowed to those with other convictions about church government. The Westminster Confession, drawn up and finally published in 1647, was essentially a Presbyterian document. The attempt to establish a presbyterian-type national church, however, did not materialise.

Although the Independents in the Westminster Assembly were few in numbers, they included some of the most able and respected men of the time. Moreover, they represented a considerable body of opinion existing beyond the Assembly, and particularly in the parliamentary army. The nucleus was a group of five men who became known as "the Dissenting Brethren". All had been exiles in Holland: Thomas Goodwin, Philip Nye, Sidrach Simpson, Jeremiah Burroughs and William Bridge. In January, 1644, they published "An Apologetical Narration". This was in effect an appeal to Parliament in defence of their position. When in October of the same year the Assembly drafted its proposed system of church government, the Independents tabled objections to three of its features:[37]

1 Particular congregations were placed under single presbyterial control.

2 A system of standing assemblies was to be set up: at congregational, classical, provincial and national levels.

3 No single congregation was allowed the right of ordination.

[36] I. Murray, *The Reformation of the Church*, p. 233.
[37] I. Murray, *The Reformation of the Church*, pp. 283-284.

Across the Atlantic, John Cotton had expounded and defended Independency in two books, "The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven (1644)" and "The Way Of The Churches Of Christ In New England (1645)". Cotton's book, "The Keys", appeared in London a few months before the publication of the 1644 Confession by the seven Particular Baptist congregations. The 1644 Confession, based as it was on the 1596 Separatist Confession, already contained a clause advocating co-operation between like-minded churches. This clause (47) states:

> "And although the particular congregations be distinct, and several bodies, every one as a compact and knit city within itself; yet are they all to walk by one rule of truth; so also they (by all means convenient) are to have the counsel and help one of another, if necessity require it, as members of one body, in common faith, under Christ their head."

The appearance of Cotton's "The Keys", with its clear and strong emphasis on inter-church fellowship, confirmed the thinking of the Particular Baptists, and spurred them to develop the regional associations peculiar to them.[38] Cotton's book, together with "An Apologetical Narration", published by the dissenting brethren within the Westminster Assembly, were instrumental in changing John Owen (1616-1683) from Presbyterianism to Independency.[39]

Owen had published a short book entitled "The Duty Of Pastors And People Distinguished" to vindicate the Presbyterian view of church polity against Episcopacy on the one hand, and extreme Congregationalism on the other. This was in 1643. From 1644 he began to write a number of tracts and books in defence of Independency. In 1667 he published "A Brief Instruction In The Worship Of God And Discipline Of The Churches Of The New Testament". At the time many dissenting congregations were springing up, and this book, which came to be known as "The Independents' Catechism", was a great help to their cause.[40] Finally, Owen wrote "The True Nature Of The Gospel Church", which was published posthumously in

[38] B. R. White, *The Doctrine of the Church*, pp. 587-588.
[39] P. Toon, pp. 18-19, 27.

1689. This was for many years regarded as the definitive exposition of Independency.[41]

From about 1645 to 1653 the Presbyterians were in the ascendant. However, from about 1653 to the end of the Commonwealth period the Independents gained control. Cromwell himself was an Independent, and soon realised that the "new presbyter" was as dangerous as the "old priest". Since he came out strongly on the side of the Independents, the Presbyterians lost much of their power.[42] During this period of Independent ascendancy, various extreme and heretical sects flourished especially in the army. Quite properly, the orthodox Independents were anxious to distinguish themselves from all such. In 1658 ministers of Independent persuasion throughout the land were summoned to a synod at the Savoy Palace in London. A committee of distinguished divines including Thomas Goodwin, John Owen, Philip Nye, William Bridge, Joseph Caryl and William Greenhill, was appointed to draw up a confession. All except Owen had been present at the Westminster Assembly. The confession, "the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order", was in most respects identical to the Westminster Confession.

The really original part of the Savoy Declaration was the "Platform of Church Polity". Here, the distinctive views of the Independents were set forth:[43]

1 Total spiritual power and authority resides in the local congregation.

2 The qualification for the calling of a minister is his election by the congregation. Formal ordination is a ratification of this choice, and is normally to be performed by the eldership of the local congregation.

3 Synods are expedient for the discussion and resolution of difficulties, but they have no power over churches and individuals The system of standing synods subordinate to one another is invalid.

[40] JO, Vol. 15, p. 446.
[41] P. Toon, p. 164.
[42] D. M. Lloyd-Jones, pp. 20-21.
[43] I. Murray, *The Reformation of the Church*, p. 275.

The Savoy Platform of Church Polity was later to be adopted by the Particular Baptists in their 1677/89 Confession with only slight modifications.

1.3.6 Nonconformists

When King Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660 the Anglican system was re-established. The "Clarendon Code" came into effect between the years 1661 and 1665. This included four parliamentary acts bringing extreme pressures upon non-Anglicans. In 1662 the first Act of Uniformity was ratified by the sovereign. This required everybody to conform as worshipping adherents of the established church. Among other matters, ministers were required to be ordained in the episcopal manner, while the Prayer Book was the standard for public worship.

When many Puritans refused to conform, a head-on clash became quite inevitable. Two thousand ministers were ejected from the Church. Many of these good men attached themselves to the Baptists and the Independents, thus strengthening greatly the cause of Non-conformity. Although the Particular Baptists were also "Independents" in the sense that they held to this form of church government, they were often distinguished from the paedobaptist Independents.

In the light of these changes, the Particular Baptists felt the need to identity themselves with the large body of Calvinistic non-Anglicans. The 1644 Confession was by then a document not well-known. The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith was, therefore, issued in 1677. This confession was based largely on the Westminster Confession and the Savoy Declaration, "to convince all that we have no itch to clog religion with new words, but do readily acquiesce in that form of sound words, which hath been in consent with the Holy Scripture, used by others before us." When the Toleration Act was passed in 1689, thirty-seven leading ministers, representing more than 107 churches all over England and Wales, signed the document. In 1744 this confession was adopted by the Calvinistic Baptists of North America, and called by them the Philadelphia Confession of Faith.

Chapter 26 of the 1677/89 Confession, entitled "Of The Church", deviated considerably from the Westminster Confession, relying al-

most wholly on the Savoy Platform Of Church Polity. This had been appended to the 1658 Savoy Declaration. By adopting the Savoy Platform, with minor amendments, the Particular Baptists were not departing from their commitment to the Independent form of church government expressed in the earlier 1644 Confession. An essential agreement with this confession was asserted in the introductory note to the 1677/89 documents. Being far more complete and better ordered than the earlier confession, that of 1677/89 may be considered as a definitive exposition of the beliefs of the Particular Baptists.

We have traced the development of Independency up to the publication of John Owen's "The True Nature Of A Gospel Church" in 1689. It should be noted that Independency was forged in the furnace of dissent from Episcopacy on the one side, and Presbyterianism on the other. The Particular Baptists differed from other Independents only in the matter of baptism and the separation of church and state. Infant baptism, which was rejected by the Particular Baptists, continued to be practised by other Independents. Until the eighteenth century the paedobaptist Independents were to remain in disagreement among themselves concerning the extent of the civil magistrate's authority in religious affairs. The Cambridge Platform of the New England churches permitted the civil authority to restrain and punish idolatry, blasphemy, heresy and the like, while the Savoy Declaration advocated a clear separation between church and state.

It should be noted, too, that the terms "Independency" and "Congregationalism" were used interchangeably to refer to the one and the same form of church government. No fourth category was conceived apart from these three: Episcopacy, Presbyterianism and Independency or Congregationalism. Churches which practised popular democracy were regarded merely as extreme Congregationalists. In fact, in the earlier years Independents preferred to be known as Congregationalists.[44] This was because the term "Independent" was used in a derogatory way by the opponents of the system. They endeavoured to imply that the former were isolationists, refusing to submit to the supposed orderliness found in the connectional church systems. A favourite charge of the Presbyterians was that Independency was tantamount to anarchy. This accusation was rebutted by the Independents' claim that Presbyterianism was inherently tyranical.[45] Moreover, when the Independents employed the term "Congregational" they meant that the visible church of Jesus Christ on

earth consists of local congregations made up of called-out saints, instead of the hierarchical structuralism of the Presbyterians or the national-church concept of the Episcopalians.

1.3.7 Independency and Congregationalism confused

A shift in the meaning of the terms began to occur very early. The extreme Independents began to forsake rule by elders for popular democracy. The followers of Robert Browne appeared to have carried his teaching about the autonomy and power of the church to an extreme. Isaac Watts (1674-1748), writing to his brother Enoch, mentioned that "there were some of the Independents heretofore called Brownists, some of whom were very irregular in the management of church affairs, but they are not to be found now."[32] John Owen alluded to the existence of "democratical confusion" in his days which hindered him from considering any other alternative to Episcopacy, apart from Presbyterianism, to which he adhered until his change of mind in 1644.[46] He described in disdain the system of church government which was "absolutely democratical or popular".[47] The term "Congregationalism" began to mean that the congregation has power to rule the church, or, otherwise expressed, the power of self-rule. The term "Independency" began to mean that the congregation is autonomous, although maintaining close fellowship with like-minded churches.

The tendency to take congregational authority to the extreme is demonstrated by the experience of the Congregational (that is, Independent) churches in New England. By the third quarter of the seventeenth century the churches there had already degenerated to the point when tension existed between the ministers and the congregations. This was due partly to the gradual disappearance of the ruling elders, and partly to a decline in spirituality among many of the people. The ministers gave warning in the "Reforming Synod" of 1679 that "unless a church have divers elders, the church government must needs become either prelatic or popular." The churches

[44] I. Murray, *The Reformation of the Church*, pp. 245, 283, 315.
[45] I. Murray, *The Reformation of the Church*, p. 293.
[32] D. Fountain, p. 104. Quoted from T. Milner, pp. 193-198.
[46] JO, Vol. 13, p. 223.
[47] JO, Vol. 16, p. 112.

finally adopted the Savoy Platform in 1708, in which Presbyterian connectionalism was advocated.[48]

The Baptists were not spared this problem. The Separatists had held to a high view of the ministry, holding that the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper were not to be administered until ministers had been appointed. This was the thrust of the 1596 Confession as well as that of John Robinson, Smyth's former co-labourer.[49] Smyth and Helwys, however, having become Baptists, were of the opinion that under mitigating circumstances the congregation may conduct these ordinances. This point is clearly brought out in Helwys's "Declaration of Faith", brought out in 1611. This became the confession of faith of the first General Baptist church which he founded later in London. Article 11 of the confession states that the congregation "may, and ought to, when they are come together, to pray, prophesy, break bread, and administer in all the holy ordinances, although as yet they have no officers, or that their officers should be in prison, sick, or by any other means hindered from the church (1 Pet. 4:10 & 2:5)." The 1644 Confession of the Particular Baptists also played down the importance ol the ministry for similar reasons.[50]

The signatories to the 1644 Confession were not ecclesiastical anarchists, nor were those who followed them in leadership in succeeding years. Under ordinary circumstances no individual and no congregation were at liberty to introduce their own innovations.[51] This is confirmed by the fact that the 1677/89 Confession reaffirmed the proper authority of the ministers. In Chapter 28, paragraph 2, it is stated that "these holy appointments (of baptism and the Lord's Supper) are to be administered by those only who are qualified and thereunto called, according to the commission of Christ." In Chapter 30, paragraph 3, it states that "the Lord Jesus hath, in this ordinance, appointed his ministers to pray, and bless the elements of bread and wine, and thereby to set them apart from a common to a holy use,

[48] I. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, pp. 16-18.

[49] Although John Robinson did not himself emigrate to New England, he continued to exercise a great influence on the Plymouth Colony by his guidance of William Brewster through writing. Brewster led the congregation in praise and prayer and in teaching the Bible and Christian doctrine but he did not preach or administer the sacraments because he was not an ordained minister. See on Brewster in NIDCC.

[50] B. R. White, *The Doctrine of the Church*, p. 582.

and to take and break the bread; to take the cup, and they communicating also themselves, to give both to the communicants."

What was advocated for extraordinary circumstances, however, could have been taken as normative by some Baptist congregations. Today, most churches which are "independent" (that is, not belonging to connectional denominations such as the Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, or Methodist churches) would profess to be practising Congregationalism. Theirs would be a Congregationalism characterised by the "democratic principle".

The point needs to be made that this modern interpretation of Congregationalism is by no means the same as the "Congregationalism" of past times. In view of this shift in the meaning of the term, it would seem best to distinguish Congregationalism, as it is understood today, from Independency. In fact, it would have been preferable to have distinguished from the beginning what were essentially two systems. Much of the confusion which has arisen would have been minimised.[52]

Presbyterians have through the years contributed to the confounding of the terms Independency and Congregationalism. Prelacy does not pose a challenge to Presbyterians. In their expositions of church government Prebyterians invariably refute Episcopacy in a manner totally acceptable to we Baptists! With Independency, however, Presbyterians find a formidable contender with which to reckon. Partly because of the presence of the "extreme Independents", and partly because of their prejudice against Independency, Presbyterians have striven hard to discredit the system.

When arguing against Independency, a favourite approach of Presbyterians is to treat it under its two purportedly leading characteristics. They assert that it is "independent" as well as "congregational".[53] The strengths of what it means to be "independent" and "congregational" are normally acknowledged. The procedure is then to follow up with an attack on the abuses of the ideas. Now, it is true that Independency, just like any other system, can be and has been abused. But to present the abuse of the system as the system seems to us to be hardly fair. The Presbyterians are, in effect,

[51] B. R. White, *The Doctrine of the Church*, p. 575.

[52] It should not surprise us to discover that many Baptist books use the standard arguments of Congregationalism to justify Independency as a system. See for example, Hezekiah Harvey, *The Church*, pp. 38-42.

raising strawmen as targets for their polemic. They have succeeded in confusing the uninitiated, and preventing undiscerning Presbyterians from considering Independency as the only biblical alternative. Nevertheless, Independency, as the scripturally decreed form of church government, still stands. The unprejudiced eyes of John Owen were opened to see this. Many Presbyterian eyes will yet be similarly opened of the Lord.

1.4 Towards A Solution

Isaac Watts (1674-1748) was a hymn-writer, preacher and educationist of the Independent persuasion. He was also a paedobaptist. As a well-respected minister during the period immediately after the death of John Owen, and the re-affirmation of the 1677 Confession by the Particular Baptists in 1689, he must be considered to have been a competent judge of the church situation of his day. We have alluded to the letter which he wrote to his brother, Enoch, in 1700 outlining the difference between the various opinions held at that time concerning the "Anabaptists". He wrote:[32]

> "They differ not from Calvinists in their doctrine, unless in the article of infant baptism; They generally deny any children to be in the covenant of grace, and so deny the seal of the covenant to them. They deny baptism by sprinkling to be real and true baptism. In church government generally Independents."

Concerning "Independents", whom now we would regard as Congregationalists, he wrote:

> "There were some of the Independents heretofore called Brownists, some of whom were very irregular in the management of church affairs, but they are not to be found now. The tenets of rigid Independents are:
> 1st. That every church has all the power of governing itself in itself, and that everything done in the church must

[53] See, for example, W. Cunningham, Vol. 2, pp. 545-556, and J. Bannerman, Vol. 2, Chap. V.

[32] D. Fountain, p. 104. Quoted from T. Milner, pp. 193-198.

> be by the majority of the votes of the brethren.
> 2nd. That every church has its minister ordained to itself, and that he cannot administer the ordinances to any other people, and if he preaches among others it is but as a gifted brother."

On those whom we would regard as true Independents, he wrote:

> "But the generalities of Independents follow rather Dr. Owen's notions; their tenets are such as these:
> 1 st. That the power of church government resides in the pastors and elders of every particular church.
> 2nd. That it is the duty of the people to consent.
> 3rd. They generally think a minister not to be ordained but to a particular church though many of them now think that, by virtue of communion of churches, he may preach authoritatively, and administer the ordinances to other churches upon extraordinary occasions.
> 4th. That it is not absolutely necessary that a minister be ordained by the imposition of hands of the other ministers, but only requisite that other ministers should be there present as advisers and assistants when he is ordained by the church; that is, set apart by their choice and his acceptance.
> 5th. They generally hold more to the doctrines of Calvin than Presbyterians do.
> 6th. They think it not sufficient ground to be admitted a member, if the person be only examined as to his doctrinal knowledge and sobriety of conversation; but they require with all some hints, or means, or evidences of the work of grace on their souls, to be professed by them, and that not only to the minister but to the elders also, who are joint rulers in the church.
> 7th. They do not require (as some think) a word of scripture, or time, or place, or sermon, by which they were converted; for very few can tell this; but only they discourse and examine them a little of the way of their conviction of sin, of their being brought to know Christ; or at least ask them what evidences they can give why they hope they are true believers, and try to search whether

> there be sincerity in the heart, as much as may be found by outward profession, that they may, as much as in them lies, exclude hypocrites."

John Owen's "The True Nature of a Gospel Church and its Government" was regarded as the standard work on Independency for a long period. The Particular Baptists saw no necessity to defend the form of church government which they were practising since it was already defended ably by others. While under persecution for most of the seventeenth century, they channelled their energy to planting churches, defending believer's baptism against that of infants, and maintaining unity within their own ranks in the face of differences over issues such as church membership and the Lord's Supper. This last question concerned whether they should be "open" or "closed".[54]

The need of the hour is to have some definitive work published on Independency, and how it contrasts with other forms of church government. Would not the solution lie in reproducing Owen's book in our own days? The works of John Owen have been made available since the 1960s in a set of sixteen volumes.[55] Included in this set is the said book. Unfortunately, it has not met the need of the time. We believe that this is not because it is buried deep in Owen's writings; there are other reasons.

First, the language and the style are difficult for the average modern reader to follow. His method of reasoning is that of Aristotle, a man unknown to most modern evangelicals. Owen's sentences are long and involved, with many digressions and sub-divisions, so much so that the main points are obscured. Much as the protagonists of Owen would like to promote his works, it needs to be admitted candidly that his works offer hard reading for the untrained mind.

Second, Owen was writing to defend Independency against the exalted claims of Episcopacy. He attempted to conciliate the Presbyterians.[56] In fact, Owen was of the opinion that the differences between Independency and Presbyterianism were not necessarily irreconcilable.[57] He harboured the hope that "so good a work" as the reconciliation of the two might one day be achieved without any compromise of scriptural truth. Owen's magnanimity is to be com-

[54] See R. W. Oliver, *The Emergence of a Strict and Particular Baptist Community*.

[55] Published by the Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh.

mended. However, in view of the gross ignorance of the Independent form of church government which prevails today, and the onslaught of militant Presbyterians upon those who differ from them, Owen's work is inadequate for the current need. More modern polemic and comparative studies would be essential.

Third, Independency and Congregationalism are treated as one and the same in Owen's book. He did point out the extreme practices of some in his days, but did not treat these emphases as effectively a system quite different to the Independency which he propounded. As has been pointed out repeatedly in this chapter, Congregationalism as it is known today is a system quite distinct and different from the Independency of John Owen.

Fourth, Owen's view of Independency was not necessarily complete or consistent. This was because of his retention of both infant baptism and the federal theology of the Presbyterians. It would appear that Owen had not interacted much with the Baptists of his day, despite the contrary impression often portrayed of him, arising from his attempt to secure the release of John Bunyan, the well-known Baptist, from prison. Owen's own testimony was that he interacted only with Presbyterians, at least up to the time of his change of mind from Presbyterianism to Independency. He said, "Of the congregational way I was not acquainted with any one person, minister or other; nor had I, to my knowledge, seen any more than one in my life. My acquaintance lay wholly with ministers and people of the presbyterian way."[46] Owen did not seem to have interacted much with Christians of other persuasions right up to the time he penned those words, which was the year 1657. He would not have learned much about the Baptist way from John Bunyan because the latter was usually in prison. Moreover, Bunyan was an enthusiastic defender of the view that differences about baptism and church membership were unimportant.

The present work is simply a stop-gap measure to meet the immediate need until a better book is produced by someone more able. If these pages can be used by God to strengthen the Reformed Baptist churches which are springing up throughout this land of Malaysia,

[56] See, for example, JO, Vol. 16, p. 202.
[57] Cf. JO, Vol. 14, pp. 258, 338.
[46] JO, Vol. 13, p. 223.

the effort will have been worthwhile. If they can be used by God to help others, both in this land and beyond, there will be much cause for rejoicing!

Without a doubt, John Owen was the doyen of Independency both in his days and for a long while after. Since his book "The True Nature" represents the views of the Independents, we shall be quoting him often in the present work. The Particular Baptists, however, practised a more consistent Independency. Where they differed from Owen, reference will be made to the 1644 and the 1677/89 Confessions. The Bible, however, is our sole authority in all matters of faith and practice rather than any confession drawn up by men. All the principles of Independency must be tested by Scripture. These, then, in descending order of importance, are our sources for an appreciation of Independency: Scripture, the 1644 and 1677/89 Confessions of Faith, and John Owen's writings.

Throughout this work the word "Independent" will be used in two ways: (i) To refer to all who uphold Independency as their form of church government, whether baptist or paedobaptist; and (ii) to refer to only paedobaptists who uphold Independency, of whom John Owen was just one among many. The context will make clear which of these two usages is meant. The word "independent", with lower case "i", will be used to refer to those who are not in connectional churches. The "independent" churches are also referred to as "free" churches.

1.5 Summary

1 Reformed Baptists are today faced with the problem of not being clear on ecclesiology. Instead of recovering the church polity of the early Particular Baptists, Reformed Baptists have allowed themselves to be influenced by Presbyterianism and other factors.

2 Traditionally, Independency and Congregationalism have been confounded as one and the same entity. This is unfortunate. The two systems are quite different and their confusion has generated problems for not a few. Instead of thinking about three forms of church government, we should reckon upon four: Prelacy, Presbyterianism, Independency, and Congregationalism.

3 Originally, the word “Congregational” meant that the visible church of Jesus Christ on earth is made up of congregations of called-out people. The word “Independent” was a derogatory term directed against those who embraced a Congregational church order. The purpose was to imply that the Congregationalists inclined to anarchy in their churches. In time a difference in meaning occurred between the two words, so that “Congregational” came to mean the congregation ruling the church, while “Independent” came to indicate that the congregation is autonomous.

4 Independency arose in the Separatist movements of the sixteenth century, and was refined by Independents from within the ranks of Puritanism in the seventeenth century. John Owen’s book, “The True Nature of a Gospel Church”, was both definitive and influential for a Iong period.

5 The Particular Baptists practised a more consistent Independency by rejecting infant baptism and refining the principles of the system. They were in the earliest stage of their history seen to be separate from the paedobaptist Independents.

6 We need a contemporary, up-to-date, exposition of Independent principles. Until a better work is produced, the present contribution would try to meet the need of the hour. The Bible, the two confessions of the Particular Baptists, and John Owen’s book, “The True Nature of a Gospel Church”, will be referred to in that order of importance.

Two

AUTONOMY

One characteristic of Independency is the autonomy of the local congregation. The principle of “autonomy” means that each congregation is to be self-ruling. There is no individual, no body of individuals, and no institution on earth outside the congregation of God’s people which has the right and power to exert rule over that congregation. Civil and ecclesiastical authorities of all and any sort are meant. Civil authorities are further excluded from interfering with the government of the church by the principle of "the Headship of Christ" over the church.

The principle of “autonomy” may be proven 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. The nature of the church must be discussed before all else because of its great relevance not only to the principle of “autonomy”, but also to the whole subject of church government. It will also help to clear a lot of the confused thinking and irregular activities among Christians today which arise from defective views on the nature of the church.

2.1 The Nature Of The Church

2.1.1 Meaning of "ekklesia"

The Greek word *ekklesia* is used 115 times in the New Testament. It is translated mostly as "church", and sometimes as "assembly". The word *ekklesia* is derived from the Greek prefix *ek* (out) and *kaleo* (call). Thus *ekklesia* originally meant "a called out assembly".[1] 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; Heb 2:12 quoting Ps. 22:22).[2] In the rest of the more than one hundred times, the word is used in reference to a Christian assembly.

Our interest lies in the use of the word in the "Christian sense". Of the 110 times that the word *ekklesia* is used in reference to a Christian assembly, more than ninety are applied to a visible, local, congregation or company of baptised disciples in a given area who are covenanted together. We read, for example, of Paul calling for the elders of the church (Acts 20:17), of the church of God which is at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:2), of the churches of Galatia (Gal. 1:2), of the seven churches of Asia (Rev. 1:11), and of the church of Ephesus (Rev. 2:1).

The word *ekklesia* is also used to refer to the universal invisible church consisting of all the elect of God in the past, present, or future. For example, we read in Ephesians 5:25 and 27, "...Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it, ... that He might present it to Himself a glorious church." Similarly, in Matthew 16:18, "...on this rock I will build my church..." Other examples are Ephesians 3:10 and Colossians 1:18.

The universal church is sometimes considered as consisting of two groups: the glorified saints in heaven, known as the "church triumphant", and the believers on earth, known as the "church militant". This makes for convenience in discussion, the biblical basis of which may be found in such passages as Ephesians 4:11-12 and Hebrews 12:22-23. In Ephesians 4:11-12, apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors-teachers are given "for the edifying of the

[1] J. Thornbury, pp. 8-22.
[2] E. T. Hiscox, pp. 22-26.

body of Christ". Here, the reference is to a portion of the body of Christ, namely that which is on earth. Similarly, in Hebrews 12:22-23, the "church of the first born" may be a reference to that portion of the universal church on earth.[3] The well-known Baptists, John Gill (1697-1771) and Arthur Pink (1886-1952), were of the view that this Hebrews passage is a reference to the totality of the universal church. The 1689 Confession quotes this as the first Bible reference in support of the doctrine of the universal church. What is certain is that this passage does not refer to the local church, nor to any other "visible church".

Membership in a local church is not always coincident with membership in the universal church, neither is membership in the latter always coincident with membership in the former. Professed believers who are unregenerate may be unwittingly admitted into the membership of the local church, as was the case with Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5). Also, true believers may be precluded, by circumstances or through ignorance, from membership with a local congregation for a time, as was the case with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8). This means that all the local churches in the world taken together do not make up the invisible universal church, neither do they form a *visible* universal church (as the paedobaptists claim, see below).

2.1.2 The characteristics of the church

The church of Jesus Christ is characterised by the following qualities:[4]

i *Unity:* This is taught in such passages of Scripture as Ephesians 4:3-6; 5:23-27; and 1 Corinthians 12. The Ephesians passage says, "...endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." There is one head – Christ. There is one body – the church. The unity of the church is spiritual in nature, and not organisational. It exists among all who are born of God, regardless of ecclesiastical differences. No man can create this unity

[3] J. Thornbury, pp. 91-105.
[4] E. T. Hiscox, pp. 31-35.

by mere external organisation or human activity. Every Christian, and every local church, should endeavour to maintain this unity by upholding the truth and expressing fellowship around the truth, for "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:5-7)."

ii *Sanctity:* The universal church of Christ is made up of only regenerate people – a people that is set apart as holy unto God. The local congregations of Christ ought also to be made up of regenerate people. Believers are a "new creation". They are called "saints", or sanctified ones. They are the "elect of God, holy and beloved" (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 5:17; Col. 3:12). "You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:5)." This holiness may not be perfect or absolute in any believer, and therefore in the church. But that does not mean that no attempts should be made to be separate from the world (2 Cor. 6:11-18).

iii *Catholicity:* Various ecclesiastical bodies have called themselves the only true universal, or catholic, church. Such claims, however, can never be supported by history or the teachings of the Bible. The only true catholicity taught in the Bible is the unity of faith among all who are redeemed by Christ's blood. The holy, catholic church is not the Church of Rome, not the Church of England, nor any other organisation in the world. It is the universal church of Christ, which is invisible as far as the work of God's grace in the hearts of the members is concerned "For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you (Luke 17:21)." "In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him (Acts 10:34-35)."

iv *Apostolicity:* It is the claim of the Church of Rome and other prelatical communions that they have an unbroken succession of ministerial gifts and ordinations that came directly from the

apostles. To them, a succession of ministry implies also a succession in church order and sacramental efficacy. Such claims are historically groundless, and doctrinally useless. True apostolicity consists not in succession but in possession, not in historical pedigree but in spiritual identity. Only those who possess and exhibit the doctrines, the spirit and the life of the apostles have the right to claim this mark of a true gospel church. "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11)." "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:19-20)."

v *Perpetuity:* The church of Jesus Christ will continue to the end of time. Strictly speaking, only the invisible church is spoken of as perpetual in the Bible. "And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed (Dan. 2:44)." "But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom, forever, even forever and ever (Dan. 7:18)." "On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it (Mt. 16:18)." "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (Mt. 28:20)." Since the invisible universal church manifests itself as local churches on this earth, we may expect that there will be local churches that remain faithful to God in every period of history. Some local churches may decay, but others will be raised up. Some lampstands may be removed, but others will be planted to replace them. The cause of Christ is imperishable, and the foundations shall never be moved.

2.1.3 The marks of a true church

Since the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the question had been raised, "By what signs, notes, or attributes may a true church of Christ he known?" To this question the Roman Catholic Catechism answers: "Unity, holiness, catholicity, apostolicity, and perpetuity." These five basic characteristics of the church are exactly what Protestants hold to, except that they are given different definitions

by the Roman Catholic Church. To these, Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) and others, from the ultra Roman Catholic standpoint, added various others.

The Roman Catholic belief is that the church is one monolithic visible entity which will continue on for all time. This indefectible (i.e. never ceasing to exist) church is tied up with the Church of Rome, the mother and mistress of all churches. The bishop of Rome is the head, the vicar of Christ, of this indefectible church. Historical succession in ministry and ordination is traced to Peter the apostle.

Protestants reject all these claims of Rome, believing them to be unfounded historically and doctrinally. Only the invisible universal church, made up of believers of every age, is indefectible or perpetual. The Roman Catholic Church makes the fatal mistake of defining an external visible church and claiming all who come into it as saved. Protestants correctly define the church by the *believers* who constitute it. True faith in Christ makes the true Christian, and true Christians make up the true church.

Since the universal church manifests itself on this earth as local congregations, the marks of the true church may rightly be expected of them as well. The local church is a microcosm of the universal church. Unity, sanctity, catholicity, apostolicity, and perpetuity should be reflected in the life of the local congregation. This is possible only when the local church upholds the truth of God's word. God's word must be faithfully preached, and symbolically proclaimed by the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. There are those who would add to these church discipline, which is assumed as included otherwise.

For this reason, Protestants define the local church as one that possesses the five characteristics already mentioned, *plus* "the preaching of the pure word of God, and the right administration of the sacraments". Edward Hiscox has correctly pointed out that preaching and the administration of the ordinances are merely references to the *actions* of the church's life rather than to the *substance* of that life. In other words, they have reference to what is *done* in the church rather than to what *constitutes* the church.[5] The five characteristics – namely unity, sanctity, catholicity, apostolicity and perpetuity – must, therefore, be seen to underlie these actions of a true

church.

The Particular Baptists of seventeenth century England, in common with other Protestants, held to this view of the visible church. Two signatories of the 1689 Confession, William Collins and Benjamin Keach, were assigned to draw up a Baptist Catechism, which was published in 1693.[6] In this catechism, often known as Keach's Catechism, is found this question and its answer:

> Q. 105. What is the visible church?
>
> A. The visible church is the organised society of professing believers, in all ages and places, wherein the gospel is truly preached and the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper rightly administered.

Since the days of the Particular Baptist, William Carey (1761-1834), the "father of modern missions", many missionary bodies have arisen. The earlier missionary bodies were run directly under the auspices of local churches. Very soon, missionary bodies and Christian organisations of all sorts that were autonomous in administration began to appear. Today we have the phenomenon of the "para-church organisations" – organisations that are created to supplement and complement the works of local churches. The objectives of these organisations are limited in scope – either to send out missionaries, or to evangelise the cities, or to work among students, or to publish tracts or Bibles, or to train up pastors and missionaries, etc.

In view of this, the definition of the visible church as given in Keach's Catechism is no longer adequate. For example, a para-church organisation devoted to the evangelisation of students may claim itself to be a church, since the common definition given of a church is "any gathered body of believers". If it is claimed that there must be the regular preaching of the gospel and the administration of the Lord's Supper, that organisation may take it upon itsell to do just that and, therefore, qualify to be called a church. But is such an organisation a church? Are para-church organisations the idea of the visible church that our spiritual forebears had?

[5] E. T. Hiscox, p. 31.
[6] EDT, p. 197.

2. AUTONOMY

The Bible knows of only two uses of the word "church" – the invisible universal church and the visible local church. Para-church organisations do not qualify as local churches because they exist for objectives that are rather limited in scope and are organised in ways that are less than biblical. A missionary organisation may have most of its members scattered all over the world, with only a small number gathered at home-base. This is hardly a local church. How are they to worship together, and conduct the Lord's Supper together regularly? By the use of the radio and the fax-machine? [Or video-conferencing via the internet?] A seminary may hold a weekly chapel service, but all its Christian life revolves around teaching and learning theology. No doubt this is some form of Christian activity, but it is hardly the idea of the local church taught in the Bible.

Ideally speaking, all gospel work should flow out of local churches. Practically speaking, however, there are situations in which Christians have to co-operate together for their mutual edification, the maintenance of gospel witness, or the accomplishment of some gospel enterprise. This, however, bespeaks more of the fellowship that exists between Christians than of their constituting together as churches. Towards arriving at a more accurate definition of the visible church, it is here proposed that three factors must be considered – the basic *purpose* of its existence, its foundational *organisation*, and its characteristic *activities*. These three factors should be such that they show the church to be a "called out people" of God.

The basic purpose for the existence of the visible church should be to glorify God by upholding the truth of His word. One key text is 1 Timothy 3:15, "I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." Truth is upheld in two basic ways: first, by its proclamation to the world in order that the elect may be called out (Mt. 28:19); and second, by the instruction of the converts to build up their faith (Mt. 28:20; Eph. 4:11-16). Both the evangelisation of the world as well as the edification of the saints should be seen in any biblical church. A defective church concentrates on one or the other. A healthy church concentrates on both.

Having established the purpose or objective of the church's existence, we need to determine the vehicle or organ by which this objective is to be accomplished. The Bible reveals that the local church

is central and unique in the purposes of God. It is the instrument of God in the evangelisation of the world and the edification of the saints. A church is formed by the covenanting together of believers in a given area in mutual care, regular worship, and continual service to God. It must have Christ as its head, the Bible as its law, and the New Testament church order as its polity. These constitute the foundational organisation, or basic structure, of the church. No other organisation has been ordained by God to achieve the purpose of glorifying Him through upholding the truth.

The activities that differentiate a local church from all other organisations are gospel proclamation, baptism and the Lord's Supper. In addition, we would expect to see some basic measures of discipline exercised to maintain the purity of the membership. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances given to the local church. They are visible symbols of inward spiritual realities – of regeneration and fellowship. What is given to the visible church may not be carelessly transferred to para-church organisations, and other gatherings of Christians, to express the unity of the universal church. Baptism should normally be carried out with the purpose of incorporating the individuals into the local church. The Lord's Supper should normally be carried out in the context of the local church.

The definition of the visible church given in Keach's Catechism will have to be modified as follows:

> "The visible church is the *biblically* organised society of professing believers, in all ages and places, *engaged in mutual care, worship, and service to God,* wherein the gospel is truly (i.e. faithfully) preached and the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper rightly administered."

Hezekiah Harvey gives a definition of the church that is even more precise:[7]

> "A (visible, 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."

[7] H. Harvey, p. 29.

This definition effectively identifies a local church and differentiates it from para-church organisations. It also does not prevent a Christian organisation from evolving into a true local church when that is necessary or feasible. The present author knows of one clear case of this happening to a Christian fellowship in an institution of higher studies in a Buddhist country. That group of Christians is gathered for mutual edification of its members, meets for weekly worship, and seeks to bear witness to others in the campus. No local church exists in the immediate vicinity. The fellowship has over the years become more formally constituted, with some of the permanent members now appointed as elders (five in number at the point of writing). What started off as a loose fellowship, in effect a para-church organisation, is now effectively a local church!

Harvey was right when he said, "Since a church is entrusted with power so grave and responsible, no body of believers should be a church unless it possesses the intellectual capacity, knowledge, and gifts adapted to the wise exercise of such powers; and in the absence of these, the body should not take on it a church organisation, but should remain a mission station under the care of some well-organised church."[8]

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.[9] Theirs, however, was a freedom that was tempered by orderliness – an "orderly freedom", one might say. This contrasts greatly with the rigidity of Episcopacy and Presbyterianism on the one hand, and the chaos of fully-fledged Congregationalism on the other.

2.1.4 Differences on "ekklesia"

The Particular Baptists of seventeenth century England saw clearly that the word *ekklesia* is used in only two ways in reference to the people of God – the universal church, and gathered congregations. In the chapter on the church, the 1689 Confession devotes only the first paragraph to the definition of the universal church, stating:

[8] H. Harvey, p. 43.
[9] S. Waldron, *Baptist Roots*, pp. 5-8.

> "The catholic or universal church, which (with respect to the internal work of the Spirit and truth of grace) may be called invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ, the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all."

The confession immediately moves on to discuss the "particular congregations", or local churches. Keach's Catechism also has a clear statement on the invisible church. That this "invisible church" is one and the same as the "universal church" spoken of in the 1689 Confession is clear from the similar words employed to describe it. It says:

> Q. 106. What is the invisible church?
>
> A. The invisible church is the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ the head.

As in many other issues, the Particular Baptists had worked out a doctrine of the church that was more biblical than other communions. All paedobaptists – whether Episcopalians, Presbyterians, or Independents – believe also in another "church" additional to the two held by the Particular Baptists. Episcopalians hold to the idea of a *national* church, while Presbyterians and Independents hold to the idea of a *visible* universal church. Since the 1689 Confession was based largely on the Westminster Confession and the Savoy Declaration, it is useful to consider how they differ among themselves.

The Westminster Confession identifies that portion of the universal church on earth, i.e. the church militant, with the visible catholic church. Chapter 25, paragraphs 2 and 3 state, respectively, that:

> "The visible church, which is also catholick or universal under the gospel, (not confined to one nation, as before under the law,) consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children; and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation."

> "Unto this catholick visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this life, to the end of the world; and doth by His own presence and Spirit, according to His promise, make them effectual thereunto."

It seems obvious that these statements on the visible catholic church were framed so as to accomodate the Presbyterian beliefs that infants of believing parents are members of the church and that some form of government beyond the immediate congregation is necessary. Later Presbyterians continued adamantly to hold to the baptism of infants and their membership in the church. Their view of the church necessarily had to be tailored to accomodate these beliefs. Charles Hodge (1797-1878), for example, wrote:

> "The difficulty on the subject of infant baptism is that baptism from its very nature involves a profession of faith. It is the way in which Christ is to be confessed before men. But infants are incapable of making such confession; therefore they are not proper subjects of baptism. To state the difficulty in another form: The sacraments belong to the members of the Church, i.e.. the company of believers. Since infants cannot exercise faith, they are not members of the Church and consequently ought not to be baptized.
>
> In order to justify the baptism of infants, we must attain and authenticate such an idea of the Church as to include the children of believing parents..."[10]

Independents denied the existence of any form of government beyond the local congregation, but continued to uphold infant baptism. They had, therefore, to uphold the idea of the visible universal church. The Savoy Declaration states that:

> "The whole body of men throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ according unto it, not destroying their own profession by any errors everting the foundation, or unholiness of conversation, are and may be called the visible

[10] C. Hodge, p. 484.

> Catholique Church of Christ, although as such it is not intrusted with the administration of any ordinances, or have any officers to rule or govern in, or over the whole Body."

When the Bible references cited to support the idea of a visible catholic church are examined, it will be found that none of them uses the word *ekklesia*. The Westminster Confession has the references 1 Corinthians 1:2; 12:12, 13; Psalm 2:8; Revelation 7:9; Romans 15:9-12. All these references are directly concerned with people who are converted or will be converted. Converted people are "visible" in the sense that they may be known to have become believers. They become members of the *invisible* universal church, and they should also join themselves to *visible* local churches. Those Bible references cited in the Westminster Confession say nothing about all believers, together, forming a church of any sort. The 1689 Confession calls such converts by the biblical name of "saints". The statement in the Savoy Declaration was thus changed, in the 1689 Confession (Chapter 26, paragraph 2), to:

> "*All persons* throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ according unto it, not destroying their own profession by any errors everting the foundation, or unholiness of conversation, are and may be called visible *saints; and of such ought all particular congregations to be constituted.*"

The 1689 Confession thus restricts the use of the word "church" to its two biblical senses, at the same time rejecting infant membership in the visible local congregations.

Acts 9:31 has been quoted to support the idea that there are more than two senses to the use of the word *ekklesia*.[11] It is claimed that the correct reading of the verse should be, "Then the church (singular) throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace..." In reply, we must say that it is precarious to build a doctrine on a controverted text. A safe principle of interpreting the Scripture is that we must proceed from what is clear to that which is unclear, and not vice versa. By comparison with uncontroverted passages such as Galatians 1:2 and Revelation 1:4 ("To the churches in Galatia", and "to the seven churches which are in Asia"), we are inclined to accept

the plural, "churches", in Acts 9:31 of the Received Text. Even if it is granted that the variant reading is right, the text does not show a different *sense* in the use of the word "church". If indeed the singular were correct it would merely be an adaptation and specialized application of the universal sense. Just as the universal church may be referred to in the limited scope of the saints on earth (that is, the church militant), so also it may be referred to in the limited scope of those in a region.[12]

Presbyterians like to quote the parable of the wheat and tares to justify the inclusion of unregenerate members in the church.[13] It is explained in the parable, however, that the field in which are found the wheat and the tares is actually the world, and not the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 13:38). Moreover, verse 41 confirms that the kingdom, i.e. the universal church, is made up of regenerate people only, from which the unregenerate must be excluded: "The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practise lawlessness." A parable that teaches the regenerate membership of the universal church is made to teach the opposite by the Presbyterians! Similarly, the parable of the dragnet (Mt. 13:47-49) and the metaphor of the true vine (Jn. 15:1-8) exclude the unregenerate from the kingdom.[14]

Sensing the weakness of their case, when confronted with the Baptists' insistence that there are only two biblical senses of the word "church", Presbyterians are wont to broaden the meaning of the word. James Bannerman went beyond the Westminster Confession by positing an additional two uses of the word "church", bringing the total to five! Thomas Witherow broadened it further, not by multiplying the number of senses of the word, but by making the word take on just one extremely general sense – namely, "an assembly of the people of God, a society of Christians".[11] By so doing, he was able to make the word fit as many uses as he liked. His lack of precision in the definition of the word will please modern-day

[11] T. Witherow, pp. 20-25.

[12] J. Thornbury, p. 108.

[13] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, pp. 6-14.

[14] The term "kingdom" speaks of a sphere of sovereignty. Strictly speaking, the church is the people who make up the spiritual kingdom of Christ. See J. Thornbury, p. 147.

advocates of para-church organisations!

One can become extreme by going too far to the right, or too far to the left. In the nineteenth century there arose in America a view of the church which went too far in the direction opposite to that of the paedobaptists. This was the view of Landmarkism, which rejected the doctrine of the universal church and held to a strict view of the local church. The term "Landmarkism" itself was derived from a tract published by J. M. Pendleton in 1854, called "An Old Landmark Reset", in which he dealt with the question of whether Baptists ought to recognise paedobaptist preachers as true gospel ministers. The movement actually began with two men – A. C. Dayton and J. R. Graves.

The latter, in particular, promoted the idea that the true church was the local Baptist church. The claim was made that Baptist churches could trace an unbroken succession of believer's baptism through the centuries to the time of John the Baptist, very much in the same way that Roman Catholics trace an unbroken succession of ordination to Peter. The theory was introduced that the church which Jesus promised to build, in Matthew 16:18, is not a spiritual body consisting of all Christians, but a local visible institution. Here we find for the first time a categorical denial of the universal church and an attempt to identify every usage of *ekklesia* in the New Testament with the local church.

Through the influence of Landmarkism, the doctrine of the universal church became very unpopular in many Baptist circles. Other peculiarities popularised by Landmarkism included the non-recognition of those who are not Baptists, closed communion (limiting the participants at the Lord's Table to members of the local church), rejection of alien immersion (immersion not authorised by a certain type of Baptist church), and adherence to the theory of church succession. These views are all related to the basic strict local church theory.[15]

On the fringes of the Reformed Baptist movement today are certain Baptists who have embraced Calvinistic soteriology but whose view of the church is coloured by their background of Landmarkian

[11] T. Witherow, pp. 20-25.

[15] J. Thornbury, pp. 169-174. In Asia, the type of local churches founded by Witness Lee is also an aberration. Each geographical/political district may have its own church – *the* local church of the Witness Lee variety.

and fundamentalistic influences.[16] The church polity that they practise is consequently affected accordingly.

2.2 The Principle Of Autonomy

2.2.1 The unity of the Bible

We have deliberately dwelt on the nature of the church because of its importance not only to the principle of Autonomy, but also to other principles bearing on the form of church government. Presbyterians recognise this and, therefore, strive to wrest the Scripture off its natural sense to make it support their preconceived idea of a church that is made up of believers and non-believers. James Bannerman, for example, wrote:

> "Admit the narrow position taken up by the Independents in regard to the true meaning and nature of a church as defined in Scripture, restrict the term to one or other of the two significations of either the invisible church at large, or a single congregation of believers in a particular locality, and you, in fact, concede every principle that is necessary for them to establish their views as to the form of the church, and the nature of its government."[17]

Important as the nature of the church is, we would not rely upon our understanding of it alone to support our assertion that Independency is the biblical form of church government. Each principle that contributes to the establishment of the biblical form of church government must itself be capable of being proved from Scripture.

Towards this end, the whole of the Bible must be appealed to. The Old and New Testaments together constitute the total revealed will of God. They speak with one voice, and not a multitude of contradicting voices. Any matter, including the biblical form of church

[16] The word "fundamentalist" was once used to mean "orthodox, sound in doctrine". With time it began to take on a narrower meaning and is today associated with that group of evangelicals who are characterised by a tendency to be overliteral in their interpretation of Scripture, the practice of aggressive separation, holding tenaciously to dispensational premillennialism, and a lack of patience with Christians who use Bibles other than the King James Version.

[17] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, , p. 17.

government, must be determined from both the Old and the New Testaments. This is the doctrine of "the unity of Scripture".

Episcopalians and Presbyterians make much of this doctrine. Along the way, they emphasize the continuity between the Old and New Testaments to the point of equating the two.[18] In reaction, dispensationalists emphasize the discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. The truth, however, lies somewhere between the two extremes. There is a sense in which the teachings of both Testaments are continuous, and there is a sense in which they are discontinuous.[19]

When countering the false claims of Episcopalians and Presbyterians, it is important not to treat the Old Testament as "less authoritative" than the New. This is what has been done by Baptists of the Congregational persuasion. For example, E. T. Hiscox makes the remarkable statement:

> "The New Testament is the constitution of Christianity, the charter of the Christian Church, the only authoritative code of ecclesiastical law, and the warrant and justification of all Christian institutions. In it alone is life and immortality brought to light, the way of escape from wrath revealed, and all things necessary to salvation made plain; while the messages are a gospel of peace on earth and of hope to a lost world."[20]

K. H. Good referred to the above quotation from Hiscox with approval.[21] He further made the statement that, "..we must also accept the principle that the New Testament thereby becomes the sufficient authority for a complete ecclesiology."[22]

W. R. Estep, in reference to the Anabaptist view of the Bible, made this statement: "Therefore, to hold that the Old Testament was equally authoritative for the Christian was to fail to recognise

[18] D. Kingdon, Ch. 3.

[19] D. Bigg, RT 60. See also the helpful article on covenant theology by E. Hulse in RT 54.

[20] E. T. Hiscox, p. 11.

[21] K. H. Good, p. 197.

[22] K. H. Good, p. 212.

the difference betweeen God's preliminary word to man and His final word to him."[23]

Apart from the incorrectness of treating the Old Testament as inferior to, or less authoritative than, the New Testament, such remarks are not likely to commend themselves to paedobaptists. The whole of Scripture, including both the Old and New Testaments, is the complete, all-sufficient and authoritative word of God – not just the New Testament (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Both the Old Testament as well as the New must be appealed to when establishing church principles – but by giving proper credence to the progressive nature of biblical revelation. It is perhaps better not to look upon the word of God as continuous or discontinuous, but rather to look upon it as a unity in which is progression and fulfilment.

2.2.2 Progressive revelation

During the Reformation, Zwingli and Luther argued their case for infant baptism and a sacral concept of the church from the Old Testament. They had earlier agreed with the Anabaptists that there is no biblical warrant for infant baptism.[24] Refusing to go all the way with the Anabaptists in following the teachings of Scripture, they had to come up with some biblical justification for retaining their beliefs. It was then that they began to turn to the Old Testament for help. Latching on the idea of the unity of the covenant of grace, they began to work out a theology in which Abraham was regarded as the federal head of the household of God. By this means, they attempted to justify infant baptism and the sacral concept of the church. Calvin was to develop this federal theology further, and to give it some semblance of credibility.[25]

In reaction, some Anabaptists appealed only to the New Testament for their teaching on believer's baptism. The Old Testament was treated as obsolete and superceded by the New. The vast majority of the Anabaptists, however, did not reject nor disparaged the Old Testament. The Waterland Confession of 1580, for example, stales in Article 29:

[23] W. R. Estep, *Renaissance*, p. 217.
[24] E. H. Broadbent, pp. 148, 168, 173.
[25] J. Calvin, Vol. 2, pp. 529-554.

> "The doctrine which ordained ministers propose to the people ought to be or to agree with that which Jesus Christ brought from heaven, which He taught the people by word and work, that is, in doctrine and life, and which the apostles of Christ, at the mandate and according to the Spirit of Christ, announced. It (as much as is necessary to us for salvation) is contained in the books of the New Testament to which we join all that which is found in the canonical books of the Old Testament and which is consonant with the doctrine of Christ and His apostles and in accord with the administration of His spiritual kingdom."[26]

Of the beliefs of the Anabaptists on Scripture, Estep writes:[27]

> "Even though there are differing emphases among the various Anabaptist writers in regard to the Scriptures and their use, there are significant areas of agreement. For all the Anabaptists the Bible was the only rule of faith and practice for discipleship and the church. Biblical revelation was held to be progressive. The Old Testament was preparatory and partial, whereas the New Testament was final and complete. All the Scriptures, they insisted, must be interpreted Christologically, that is, through the mind of Christ. The Holy Spirit alone can illuminate the letter of the Bible and give it convicting power in the life of the seeker. The Bible is the living Word of God, that can give us new life in the power of the Spirit."

What the Anabaptists insisted upon was that there must be a proper appreciation of the progressive development in the revelation of God, from the Old Testament to the New. Pilgrim Marpeck (c. 1490-1556) was to contribute most to Anabaptist thought on the interpretation of Scripture. While holding the entire Bible to be the word of God, he made a distinction between the purpose of the Old Testament and that of the New. As the foundation must be distinguished from the house, so the Old Testament must be distinguished

[26] W. L. Lumpkin, p. 59.
[27] W. R. Estep, *Anabaptist Story*, p. 145.

from the New. The Old Testament was promise; the New, fulfilment. Failure to place the Old and New Testaments in proper sequence and relationship, Marpeck held, was disastrous. For to make the Old Testament normative for the Christian life was to seriously misinterpret the biblical message. In Marpeck's eyes the pope, Luther, Zwingli, and the "false Anabaptists" were all guilty of this fundamental error.[28]

Today, the idea that revelation was given by God to man progressively and cumulatively is recognised in the new discipline of Biblical (or Chronological) Theology.[29,30] Paedobaptists have shown their appreciation of this field of studies, and have contributed to its development.[31] Our appeal to them, however, is that they be more consistent throughout, and not begin to hedge when the results of biblical studies do not favour their preconceived ideas. We will have occasion to say more of this in relation to their belief on infant baptism. Suffice to say at this point that paedobaptists err by equating the New Testament with the Old, while dispensationalists err by exalting the New above the Old.[32]

2.2.3 The one body of Christ

This leads us to the controversial question – Did the church begin in the Old Testament or the New? Paedobaptists would answer, "In the Old." Dispensationalists would answer, "In the New." With Thornbury, and the older generation of Particular Baptists, the present author believes that the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes. Wrote Thornbury:

[28] W. R. Estep, *Renaissance*, pp. 218-219.

[29] Robert Sheehan has helpfully suggested this alternative name. See RT 125.

[30] A helpful series of studies on Biblical Theology, by Don Garlington, is found in RT 72, 73, 75, 78, 80, 83, and 85.

[31] See, for example, J. Edwards, Vol. 1, pp. 532-615; and G. Vos, *Biblical Theology*.

[32] We use the word "dispensationalist" in the commonly understood sense of those who hold to the idea that the history of the world may be divided into different periods, or dispensations, in each of which God saves His people by different means – such as by works, by the keeping of the law, by faith in Christ, etc.. Among the exponents of this erroneous view are C. I. Scoffield and L. S. Chafer. Note, however, that there is a sense in which it is right to refer to the Old Testament and the New Testament periods as different dispensations.

> "Viewed as a *congregation* spiritually gathered at the feet of Jehovah in worship and praise, we must say that there has always been a church from the time that men began to call on the Lord. In this respect we would agree wilh the Reformed (i.e. paedobaptist) position. But viewed as "the body of Christ", a mystical organism created by the death of Christ and actually formed by the work of the Holy Spirit, we would say the church never had an actual existence until the redemptive achievements of Christ the Head became a historical reality. It is our belief that the body of Christ existed only in the purpose of Christ as a mystery before Christ actually came, but in the age of grace, which is founded on the work of Christ and the coming of the fullness of the Holy Spirit, the church came into being as the "one body". In this respect we agree with the dispensationalists, i.e. that the body of Christ did not exist in the Old Testament in actuality. We differ in one respect from the dispensational interpretation, however, in that we believe that the Old Testament saints are *now* in the body, the church, which includes all the saved – past, present, in heaven, and earth. This is necessarily so, for if the church is a body in vital union with Christ, created by His death, then it must include all who share in the benefits of His death. But Christ died for the saints of the Old Testament period as well as those of the New. This means, in short, that they are a part now of that body created in Christ, consisting in fact the first members of that organism historically."[33]

One way of looking at it is to regard the church as already conceived and developing in foetal form in the Old Testament period, ready for birth in embryo form during the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, actually born on the day of Pentecost with the full outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon it, and developing from infancy to maturity during the New Testament period. It is significant that the most developed teaching on church life is given in the Pastoral

[33] J. Thornbury, p. 52. That the Particular Baptists were of the same view may be seen from their use of the word "church" in the Appendix to the 1677 Confession of Faith.

Epistles, the last writings of the apostle Paul. 1 Timothy focuses on the public worship and proper organisation of the church, Titus on the sanctified life or conduct of the church, and 2 Timothy on the sound doctrine of the church.[34] Significant also is the fact that the last book of the Bible devotes three chapters (Rev. 1-3) to teaching on the church.

2.2.4 Visible congregations

We are now ready to offer some proofs for the principle of Autonomy. The first proof is that God's people have always been governed as visible entities, or congregations. Before the Flood, and after that as well, the worship of God was performed in large families. The case of Abraham and his large household is an example. Abraham and his family and servants, numbering hundreds of souls (Gen. 14:14), were accustomed to worshipping God as one household.[35,36]

The nation of Israel was a congregation. In Leviticus 4:13-15, we read, "Now if the whole congregation of Israel sins unintentionally, ...And the elders of the congregation shall lay their hands on the head of the bull before the Lord." They were a people separated from other nations, and specially holy to the Lord. They met in one place called "the tabernacle of meeting", or literally, "the tabernacle of the congregation", and offered their sacrifices at one altar (Lev. 1:3, 4; 17:4, 5). Three times in the year all the males appeared together at Jerusalem, both when the tabernacle was around and after, when it was replaced by the temple. Besides, there were priests and Levites stationed permanently at Jerusalem, acting as representatives of the nation and offering sacrifices on behalf of the congregation.

The synagogues also were congregations. Although we have no record of its divine institution, we do know that our Lord honoured the worship in the synagogue. The word translated "assembly" with reference to Christians in James 2:2 is the same Greek word used in the Septuagint (i.e. the Greek version of the Old Testament) for the gathering of the Jews.

The New Testament churches were divinely instituted as separate congregations, as we have discussed at some length above. John Gill

[34] W. Hendriksen, *Survey*, p. 408.
[35] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 3-4.
[36] J. Gill, Vol. 2, p. 568.

pointed out that the formation of New Testament churches, consisting of separate congregations, is actually prophesied of in Ecclesiastes 12:11 and Isaiah 4:5.[36] The first passage reads, "The words of the wise are like goads, and the words of the masters of the assemblies are like well-driven nails given by one Shepherd." The second passage reads, "...then the LORD will create above every dwelling place of Mount Zion, and above her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day and the shining of a flaming fire by night. For all the glory there will be a covering." This understanding of the said passages has a lot to commend itself.

It has been argued pragmatically that the church in Jerusalem must have been too large to worship "under a single roof" in view of the thousands who were converted on the day of Pentecost and subsequently (Acts 2:41; 4:4).[37] This, however, is only an assumption that fails to take into account two facts: one, that the early believers actually met in one wing of the temple of Jerusalem called Solomon's Porch until they were scattered by persecution (Acts 5:12; 3:1, 11; 8:1); two, the converts included a great number of visitors from all over the Roman Empire who came to celebrate the Passover feast plus others from the vicinity of Jerusalem (Acts 2:5-13; 5:16). This vast number of converts would have returned to all parts of Judea and beyond to form congregations that we read of later in Acts 9:31. The persecution recorded in Acts 8:1 would have further scattered the believers. It was not impossible for the church in Jerusalem to gather as one congregation. The rulers were opposed to them, but the favour which they had among the people stayed the hand of persecution (cf. Acts 2:47).[38] The testimony of Scripture is that the church in Jerusalem was indeed one congregation (Acts 14:27; 15:4, 12, 22). The church historian, Eusebius, indicated that at the time when Jerusalem fell in AD 70, the church in Jerusalem was still meeting as one congregation, saying, "The whole body, however, of the church at Jerusalem, having been commanded by a divine revelation, given to men of approved piety there before the war, removed from the city, and dwelt in a certain town beyond the Jordan, called Pella."[39]

[36] J. Gill, Vol. 2, p. 568.
[37] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 13.
[38] J. L. Dagg, p. 78.
[39] Eusebius, Bk. 3, Ch. 5.

From all the above considerations, we come to the clear conclusion that God dealt with His people as congregations. Each congregation was dealt with independently. Each congregation was, therefore, autonomous. 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. It was not a gathering of representatives of many churches (Acts 15:4). Moreover, the decree sent out to all the Gentile churches was more a declaration of truths than an edict demanding compliance. The apostles, despite their authority over the churches, acted merely as elders in the church of Jerusalem, in which James appeared to be the pastor (1 Pet. 5:1; Acts 15:13ff. cf. 12:17). As apostles, they spoke the words of God with authority to the churches. As elders, they merely gave their advice to other churches and did not dictate over them (2 Cor. 8:8; 1 Pet. 5:1). Local churches were left alone to exercise their own rule, as in the case of the expulsion of the immoral member in Corinth (1 Cor. 5:1ff.).

2.2.5 The final court of appeal (Mt. 18:15-20)

That the Lord anticipated the formation of churches according to the pattern revealed in the later part of the New Testament is clear from a number of passages in the Gospels:

Matthew 9:36-37, 'But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest."' Here, the Lord is looking ahead, beyond the immediate space and time, to the multitudes who would be called out of the world to believe in Him.

Matthew 28:19-20, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of

the age." The reference to future disciples is clear. And if baptism is taken to include the idea of incorporation into a local church, which surely it does, there is here the anticipation of the founding of local congregations. The further teaching to be given the disciples make sense only in the context of the local church.

John 13:34-35, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." To limit these words to only the immediate disciples will be to bleed "the new commandment" of its abiding significance. The question is, how is the love between Christians to be known by all if they are not gathered into visible congregations?

John 17:20, 23, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; ...I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me." Again, future converts are in mind. The question is, how is the world going to know that they are disciples, and loved by the Father, if they are not gathered into visible congregations?

Matthew 16:18, "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." The Lord is here anticipating the founding of His church. Here, of course, the reference is to the universal church. But the universal church is to manifest itself as local congregations, as the subsequent teachings of the New Testament reveal. We have already discussed this at some length above, under the section on "the nature of the church".

Matthew 18:17, "And if he refuses to hear them tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector." The reference here surely cannot be to the universal church. 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 mention the three initial steps. The natural understanding of the passage is clearly that the church is the final authority. It will not do to read into the passage and say that the word "church" here is used in the

abstract sense with the meaning of "all that is involved at higher church levels". It is wrong also to assume that the word "church" is 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.

The argument that the Christian church was not in existence at the time when the Lord uttered the words of Matthew 18:15-20 is really begging the question.[40] Due allowance must be made for the progressive nature of revelation. The Lord did anticipate the formation of the Christian church, as we have shown above. We have noted also that Ecclesiastes 12:11 and Isaiah 4:5 predicted the formation of New Testament congregations. If Pentecost is regarded as the time when the New Testament church was born, the disciples of Christ in the period before that time may be regarded as the church in embryo. It consisted of the apostles at first, but included others later (cf. Acts 1:12-15). The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, if in actuality spoken only to the eleven apostles, was in effect a commission to the churches in subsequent ages. If the Lord's Supper was in actuality given to the eleven apostles, it was in effect given to local churches in subsequent generations. This is clear from 1 Corinthians 11:17-34.

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. This strong argument based on Matthew 18:15-20 to prove the autonomy of the church has yet to be effectively rebutted by Episcopalians and Presbyterians.[41] The same passage is used by Congregationalists to prove that the power of rule resides in the membership of the church. To this we will not comment at the moment. Here, we are interested to know what type of rule should subsist in the church and not where the power of rule should reside, nor who should exercise the rule. With regard to the type of rule, we say the church is autonomous or self-ruling.

[40] J. Bannerman, Vol. 2, p. 311.

[41] J. Bannerman asserts without proof, "The argument from this passage in Matthew, so far from being in favour of Independency, is, on the contrary, conclusive in support of the Presbyterian theory." Two references are given, one of which is Gillespie's *Aaron's Rod Blossoming*, Book 3, Chapters III-V. Gillespie's arguments, although intended to support Presbyterianism, actually support the In-

2.2.6 Independent congregations (Rev. 1-3)

The relevance the book of Revelation to ecclesiology has long been overlooked. The first three chapters of the book in particular have much to teach on the church – its nature, government, discipline, purity, and much more. What reasons are there for this neglect? In my opinion, there are three.

Firstly, there is the widely held idea that Revelation is a book that is hard to understand. It is primarily a book of prophecy, and there appears to be so many opinions held with regard to its interpretation.[42] That being so, no conclusive doctrine may be drawn out of it. The book is therefore avoided because of its apparent difficulty.

Secondly, since the Reformation Presbyterians and Independents alike have been countering the claims of Episcopacy that biblical precedent for the superiority of the bishop may be found in the angel of each of the churches mentioned in Revelation 3. Since the "angel" is singular, and taken to mean the bishop, while the church is taken to mean many congregations under one and the same rule, the case for Prelacy is built up. In reaction, Presbyterians and Independents have avoided basing their ecclesiology on the book of Revelation.

Thirdly, Presbyterians appear to have an added reason for playing down the importance of the book of Revelation to the subject of Ecclesiology. If attention is focussed on the book, it will be revealed that Independency is clearly taught there!

The book of Revelation is important to the subject at hand for the following reasons. First, it is part of the Bible. If the Bible is the sole authority in all matters of faith and practice, if it is the final and sufficient word of God to us, then neglect of the book would leave us that much the poorer. However difficult the book may appear to be, it is still God's revelation to us and should therefore be capable of being understood, at least in its basic outline or main thrust. Only, extra care must be exercised in approaching the book so that the well-established rules of biblical interpretation are not violated and

dependent system of elders ruling by congregational consent. Gillespie's burden was to counter, on the one hand, the Erastian claim that "the church" of Mt. 18:17 is a reference to the civil magistrate, and on the other hand, the Congregational idea of "a greater number". This author has no recourse to the other reference in Bannerman, which is likely out of print.

[42] The NIV Study Bible (Zondervan Bible Publishers), for example, lists four main views – Preterist, Historicist, Futurist, and Idealist.

no violence is done to the overall teaching of the Bible. While acknowledging that there are some parts of the book that are hard to understand, the difficulty of the book as a whole has perhaps been exaggerated.

The vision of Revelation 12, for example, is quite easily understood for the reason that it is self-explanatory in its basic outline. The identity of the fiery red dragon described in verse 3 is revealed as the Devil in verse 9. The woman who gave birth to a male child and who was persecuted by the dragon is described as having other offspring "who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ (v. 17)". Since her other offspring are clearly the followers of Christ, we may safely conclude that the woman is actually the church. The identity of the male child born by the woman is also clear. He was to rule all nations with a rod of iron, and he was caught up to God and to His throne. Who could He be apart from the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Ps. 2:9)? Once the identity of the main characters and the outline of the vision are clear, the message and the applications are quite straightforward.

This leads us to the second reason why the book of Revelation is so important to ecclesiology. The first three chapters of the book is a vision that directly concerns the church and its relationship to Christ. Just as with the vision in the twelveth chapter, this vision is also self-explanatory in its basic outline. The main characters are identified. The apostle John saw seven lampstands which are identified as seven churches (Rev. 1:20). The person described in the first chapter is also identified. He is "like the Son of Man" (v. 13), "the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last" (vv. 11, 17). He is the One who lives, and was dead, and is alive forevermore. And He has the keys of Hades and Death (v. 18). Clearly, He is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ! The subsequent account of the vision in chapters 2 and 3 is couched in plain language which should pose no problem in its interpretation, except perhaps for the meaning of the angel of each of the churches.[43]

There is a third reason for the relevance of the book to ecclesiology, which has to do with the discipline of Biblical Theology. Since God's revelation came to man progressively and cumulatively, the

[43] A helpful commentary, although somewhat sketchy, on the book of Revelation is *More Than Conquerors*, by W. Hendriksen.

later revelation must be regarded as the fulfilment or ultimate development of all earlier types, precepts, principles and teachings. The book of Revelation is the final instalment of God's word to man, written by the last surviving apostle in the year AD 96. It, therefore, speaks with finality to us. If ever there is a norm set for the form of church government, it is to be found in the book of Revelation. Our understanding of any doctrine in the book of Revelation must, of course, not contradict what is found in the earlier revelation. If a truth is established by the careful application of "the analogy of Scripture" (that is, the principle that Scripture must interpret Scripture) as well as the careful exegesis of the texts, the case is as good as proven. If, further, the principles of Biblical Theology are shown to have been properly applied, the case is invincibly proven.

How does the last book of the Bible prove Independency? We consider first the lampstands recorded in Chapter 1. It must be carefully noted that the word is in the plural (vv. 12, 13, 20). This is not the plural of the word "lamp" (*luchnos*), which is a portable lamp usually set on a stand.[44] Instead, it is the plural of the word "lampstand" (*luchnia*). There were seven individual lampstands that John saw, not one single lampstand with seven branches on top of which were seven lamps. The Iampstands that John saw were different from the lampstand found in the Old Testament tabernacle. Clear as this is, commentators continue to make the mistake of assuming that John saw a lampstand like the one in the Old Testament tabernacle. For example, the Presbyterian, Patrick Fairbairn,[45] boldly asserted that, "In the first chapter of Revelation the image occurs in its original form, 'the seven golden lamps' (not candlesticks, as in our version, but the seven lamps on the one candlestick), which are explained to mean 'the seven churches'."

In verse 13 it is written, "and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man,..." The word "midst" (*mesos*) is an adjective denoting *middle, in the middle*.[46] In Luke 22:55, for example, we read that "Peter sat in the midst of them", or literally, "a middle one of them". If Fairbairn were right about the lamps, Christ would have to be floating above the ground in order to be in the midst of them! This would be an unwarranted assertion which

[44]Vine, Vol. 2, p. 308.
[45]P. Fairbairn, Vol. 2, p. 324.

amounted to "eisegesis" (reading into the text) instead of "exegesis" (reading out of the text). If Christ were not floating above the ground, it would not be possible for Him to be "in the midst" of a single lampstand. Either way, Fairbairn could not be right. No difficulty is encountered if we note that Christ is not in the midst of the *lamps* but in the midst of the *lampstands*.

We are expressly told that the seven golden lampstands are seven churches. What is the significance of these lampstands? While modern commentators have nothing to say about this, the older generation of commentators did not hesitate to state its obvious significance. Matthew Poole, commenting on Revelation 1:12, says, "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."[47]

The difference between the Old Testament church and the New Testament church is clear. In the Old Testament, the church was an organic entity, in the form of a nation – the nation of Israel. Any non-Jew who wished to worship the God of Israel had to become a "naturalised Jew" by adopting the culture, getting circumcised, and being absorbed into the nation (Ex. 12:48; Num. 9:14; Ezra 6:21). The New Testament church, however, is to be made up of individuals from all nations who are united to Christ by faith, and gathered into local churches. In this way, the church universal manifests itself physically and visibly on this earth as local churches, which are united to one another by their spiritual union with Christ. The churches are not united together in a visible organisation.

Intimation of this change as revelation progressed is seen in the fact that the lampstand of the tabernacle (Ex. 25:31-40; 37:17-24) was replaced by ten lampstands in the temple in the time of Solomon (1 Kings 7:49). These lampstands were modelled after that which was in the tabernacle, each having seven lamps on top of the branches (2 Chron. 4:20 cf. 1 Chron. 28:15). Matthew Poole commented perceptively on 1 Kings 7:49, "...ten, according to the number of the tables; whereas Moses made but one; whereby might be signified the progress of the light of sacred truth, which was now

[46]Vine, Vol. 3, p. 65.

[47]Matthew Poole's Commentary on the whole Bible.

grown clearer than it was in Moses' time, and should shine brighter and brighter until the perfect day of gospel light."[47]

As revelation was progressively given in the Old Testament dispensation, prophecies on the advent of Christ (e.g. Isa. 9:1-7; 52:13-53:12), the calling of the Gentiles (e.g. Isa. 60-66; Amos 9:11-15), the replacement of ceremonial worship with spiritual worship (e.g. Jer. 31:33-34), and the change from one national congregation of God's people to many congregations of gathered believers (Eccl. 12:11; Isa. 4:5), became clearer and clearer.

When we come to the book of Revelation, the number of lampstands is seven. It is widely recognised that the numbers seven and ten are symbolic of perfection and completeness. What Fairbairn said of the Ten Commandments may equally well be said of the church as represented by the ten lampstands in Solomon's temple, "the number ten, to indicate its perfection as one complete and comprehensive whole."[48] The numbers "seven" and "ten" were not arbitrarily chosen.

We may quite safely say this much – the single lampstand with seven branches in the tabernacle, and the ten lampstands in Solomon's temple, represented the people of God in the Old Testament dispensation. There is a progression in revelation of gospel light. There is also a progression in the preparation for the New Testament dispensation, when the people of God will be gathered into separate congregations, as represented by the seven lampstands of the book of Revelation. The seven churches of Asia in the book of Revelation symbolically represent all Christ's churches from His advent until His return to judge the worId.

That the seven churches in Revelation 1 were independent of one another, and therefore autonomous, is further confirmed in Chapters 2 and 3. They were each held directly accountable to the Lord for their purity and faithfulness. The significance of the "angel" of each of the churches will be discussed in a subsequent chapter.[49] We conclude by saying that the New Testament local church is autonomous.[50]

[47] Matthew Poole's Commentary on the whole Bible.

[48] P. Fairbairn, Vol. 2, p. 79.

[49] See Chapter 5 of this book, "The Priority of the Ministry".

[50] Differences on the principle of "autonomy" will be considered further in Chapter 12, on "The Communion of Churches".

2.3 Summary

1 The Greek word for church (*ekklesia*) is used 115 times in the New Testament. It is used in only two senses:
(i) The visible local congregation of baptised disciples in a given area who are covenanted together.
(ii) The invisible universal church consisting of all the elect of God in the past, present, or future.

2 The universal church is characterised by the five marks of unity, sanctity, catholicity, apostolicity, and perpetuity. Since the local church is a microcosm of the universal church, these five characteristics may rightly be expected of it as well.

3 In view of the proliferation of para-church organisations today, it is necessary to define the church accurately so as to distinguish it from such organisations. A good definition is as follows: "A visible or local church is a congregation of believers in Christ, baptised upon 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 Apart from the invisible universal church and the visible local church, paedobaptists of the 17th century believed also in a visible universal church. Presbyterians of later generations attempted to broaden the meaning of *ekklesia* further in order to accommodate infant baptism and the synodical form of church government.

5 The Landmark Baptists went to the opposite extreme of denying the existence of the universal church. The claim was made by them that the local Baptist church was alone the true church, which could trace an unbroken succession of believer's baptism through the centuries to the time of John the Baptist.

6 Our understanding of the nature of the church determines to a great extent the form of church government that we believe to be biblical. However, each principle that contributes to the form of church government must itself be capable of being proved from Scripture. Towards this end, one must take into account the unity of the Bible as well as the progressive nature of biblical revelation. Presbyterians tend to err by equating the Old Testament with the

New, while dispensationalists tend to err by exalting the New Testament above the Old.

7 The principle of Autonomy may be proven from:
(i) The pattern of rule established by God for His people in biblical times. God's people have always been governed as visible entities, or congregations.
(ii) The direct teaching of our Lord on church government. Matthew 18:15-20 shows that the church is the final court of appeal in disciplinary matters. There is no authority or power on earth that is higher than that given by Christ to His church.
(iii) The final teaching of the book of Revelation. The vision of the lampstands in Chapters 1 to 3 show that congregations should be independent and autonomous.

Three

THE HEADSHIP OF CHRIST

The principle of "the headship of Christ" is central to the discussion on church government. On this rock stands the true church, and on this same rock the false church founders. The principle, and its implications must be correctly understood, without which there will be no possibility of sifting the many claims of the various systems of church government. The vaunted claims of a church come to nothing if it does not believe in the headship of Christ. The doubtful claims of another church may yet be tolerated if it does hold to Christ's headship. From this principle 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 Proven

There are many direct as well as indirect teachings in the Bible on the headship of Christ over the church. The direct teachings include the following:

1. Colossians 1:8, "And He (Christ) is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence."

2. Ephesians 1:22-23, "And He (God) put all things under His (Christ's) feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the

church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all."

3. Ephesians 5:23, "For the husband is the head of the wife, as also Christ is the head of the church; and He is the Saviour of the body."

4. John 18:36, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but My kingdom is not from here."

Since the kingdom of Christ (literally, the rule of Christ) extends over His church, the last-quoted verse teaches not only the spiritual nature of Christ's kingdom, but also that He is head over the church.

It is to be noted that all these verses refer to the *universal* church of Christ. This does not militate against the truth that Christ is head over every *local* church. If anything, it emphasises the truth that Christ is head over *every* local church on earth. We have seen in the previous chapter, that the universal, invisible, church of Christ manifests itself in the world as local, visible, congregations. If Christ is the head of the universal church, He is also head of every such congregation.

Moreover, Matthew 28:18 gives us Christ's words, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." Christ's universal authority might not be recognised by all at the moment, and His rule over all might not have been fully realised just yet (Phil. 2:9-11; 1 Cor. 15:20-28), but the truth remains that He *has* been given authority over all. Converted people are those who have been conquered by the grace of God through the hearing of the gospel. They become willing subjects of Christ, and certainly own Christ as their Lord. The local church, which is made up of such believers, cannot do less than own Christ as its head.

The 1689 Confession recognises this truth by quoting Colossians 1:18, together with Matthew 28:18-20 and Ephesians 4:11-12, in the statement on the headship of Christ (Chapter 26, paragraph 4):

> "The Lord Jesus Christ is the head of the church, in whom, by the appointment of the Father, all power for the call-

> ing, institution, order, or government of the church, is invested in a supreme and sovereign manner;..."

The Westminster Confession as well as the Savoy Declaration have similar statements.

3.2 The Principle Expounded

As head o! the church, Christ acts as the mediator between God and men – holding to the offices of prophet, priest and king. Chapter 8, paragraph 1, of the 1689 Confession states this:

> "It pleased God, in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, His only begotten Son, according to the covenant made between them both, *to be the mediator between God and man; the prophet, priest, and king; head and saviour of His church,* the heir of all things, and judge of the world; unto whom He did from all eternity give a people to be His seed and to be by Him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified." (Italics added for emphasis.)

3.2.1 Christ as prophet

As prophet, Christ revealed the word of God to men. He is Himself the incarnate Word, so that he who has seen Him has seen the Father (John 1:1-3; 14:7, 9). Prophethood, therefore, speaks of God's revelation. Christ continues to exercise headship over His church by bringing His word to bear on the consciences of His people. His Spirit strives with His people to bring them into closer conformity with His word, and thereby sanctifies them (Eph. 5:25-27).

The church that acknowledges Jesus Christ as head must submit to His teaching as revealed in the word of God. The sole authority of Scripture in all matters of faith and practice must, therefore, be acknowledged. 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. The church that defies God's word, and honours human traditions and human inclinations instead, does not have Christ as its head.

3.2.2 Christ as priest

Jesus Christ is also priest. Priesthood speaks of the worship of God. In the Old Testament, the priests led the people of God in worship. Jesus Christ, as our High Priest, offered Himself as the all-sufficient sacrifice on the cross of Calvary for our redemption (Heb. 10). He continues to intercede for His people in heaven.

The church that acknowledges Christ as head 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 us that God must be worshipped "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24). Nothing must be added, and nothing taken away (Dt. 12:32; Rev. 22:18-19). There have been differences of opinion in the actual *applications* of the regulative principle of worship, arising from differences in people, culture, and time. One church must respect another when differences like these arise. Close fellowship is possible when each church upholds the regulative principle and is conscientiously applying it to its own circumstances.

Worship that is regulated by the word of God need not be dull, lifeless, and stifling. The word of God does not enslave, but it liberates. In the attempt to be relevant and contemporary, many churches have ignored the regulative principle of worship. Human innovations, carnal practices, and unedifying features have been introduced. Such a church cannot properly be said to have Christ as its head.

3.2.3 Christ as king

Jesus Christ is also king. Kingship speaks of rule or government. Christ has equipped the local church with all that it needs to function properly. Clear teaching is given in the Bible on how the church is to be organised and governed. Enough instructions are given on how discipline is to be exercised so that the church is kept pure, faithful, and healthy.

The church that acknowledges Christ's headship must 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 hold sway. Which is the biblical form of church government? Who should exercise rule in the church? How is church

discipline to be implemented? These are issues that must be honestly and courageously faced.

3.2.4 The number and order of offices

Both the *number* and the *order* of these offices of Christ are important – prophet, priest, and king. No church is perfect this side of life. Every church, however, must strive to be pure and faithful, in doctrine as well as in practice. The local church is a *golden* lampstand *in principle*, because Christ has sanctified it with His blood (Rev. 1:12. 20). It must also be golden *in reality*, because that is the will of God for it (Eph. 5:25-27). Continual reformation of the church is therefore necessary, without which no blessing from God may be expected.

The recognition of the number and order of Christ's offices will help us in: (1) determining what constitutes a true church; (2) the work of reforming our own churches; and (3) determining the extent of fellowship we might have with other churches. From the Reformation, those who have attempted to define a true church have been subconsciously conditioned and guided by the offices of Christ. They have, almost unanimously, come to the same conclusion that a true church should have the preaching of God's word, the correct administration of the ordinances, and the exercise of church discipline.

In reforming a church, all three areas must be involved, and in that order of importance – the word, worship, and government. This number and order help us to determine which church most clearly recognises Christ as head. A church that emphasises correctness of church government without an equal emphasis given to correctness in worship and doctrine is very defective. Our present study in church government should, therefore, be tempered by a recognition of its proper place in the overall life of the church.

In Reformed circles, much attention has been given to the issue of unity between churches. Fellowship between individual believers have often been confused with fellowship between churches. Disagreements have arisen between churches that are otherwise like-minded, over the extent of fellowship one church might have with other churches. Differences over how unity between churches should be expressed have plagued the Christian world. One step forward in this area of discussion would be to work out and apply the doctrine

of the three offices of Christ.

The exposition above arises from the truths expressed in Chapter 8, paragraphs 9 and 10, of the 1689 Confession:

> "This office of mediator between God and man is proper only to Christ, who is the prophet, priest, and king of the church of God; and may not be transferred from Him to any other."
>
> "This number and order of offices is necessary; for in respect of our ignorance, we stand in need of His prophetical office; and in respect of our alienation from God, and imperfection of the best of our services, we need His priestly office to reconcile us and present us acceptable unto God; and in respect of our averseness and utter inability to return to God, and for our rescue and security from our spiritual adversaries, we need His kingly office to convince, subdue, draw uphold, deliver, and preserve us to His heavenly kingdom."

3.3 The Principle Denied

The headship of Christ over the church is explicitly denied by two widespread errors – Papism and Erastianism.

3.3.1 Papism

Papism, or Popery, is the error that claims for the pope of the Roman Church power over both the spiritual and the temporal realms. Two views prevail in that church, which do not make any material difference to our present argument. 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.[1] The fact is that the sole headship of Christ is denied by the transference of His power to a mere man or a group of men.

The claim is sometimes made that Christ is head of the church in the ultimate sense. This does not change the situation in any

[1] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, pp. 203-205.

way since Christ as head of the church has not founded the church and delegated His power to human administrators. In the words of James Bannerman, Christ "is not only the founder of the Christian church; He is ruler and administrator of it, in such a way that He keeps in His own hand all the power and authority and grace that belong to that society."[2] Put another way, Christ is head of His church in a direct and immediate sense. This is a truth denied in Papism.

3.3.2 Erastianism

Erastianism is the doctrine that maintains the supremacy of the state over the church. Named after the German theologian, Thomas Erastus (1524-83), the theory was practised long before that time.[3] It began to appear in the fourth century when Constantine professed conversion and legalised the Christian faith in his realm. Advocated by Martin Luther in Germany and Henry VIII in England, this theory has had historical manifestation in the state churches of Scandinavia, Germany, and England.[4]

The chief contribution of Erastus to the theory which now bears his name is that he, more clearly than others before him, laid down the principle that Christ has not appointed a government in the church in the hands of church officers distinct from the civil magistrate.[5] Erastianism may justly be described as making the church subordinate to the state, in opposition to the popish extreme of making the state subordinate to the church. In Erastianism, the monarch of the nation is held to be the head of the church.

3.4 Differences On Church-State Relationship

The headship of Christ is claimed to be upheld in Presbyterianism, Independency, and Congregationalism. This is for the obvious reason that in none of these systems is there a human head of the church. Traditional Presbyterianism, however, denies the headship

[2] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 199.
[3] W. Cunningham, Vol. 1, p. 397.
[4] G. I. Williamson, p. 192.
[5] W. Cunningham, Vol. 1, p. 399.

of Christ in an implicit way. To understand how this is so, we must discuss the different theories of church-state relationship.

Apart from Papism and Erastianism, there are three other systems of belief on the relationship between the church and the state: Co-operatism, Voluntaryism, and Separatism. Co-operatism is a name we have invented, for want of a better word, to describe that system which has for long been wrongly associated with the principle of Co-ordinate Authorities in traditional Presbyterianism. That Co-operatism is a better term to describe the belief of traditional Presbyterianism will become clear later.

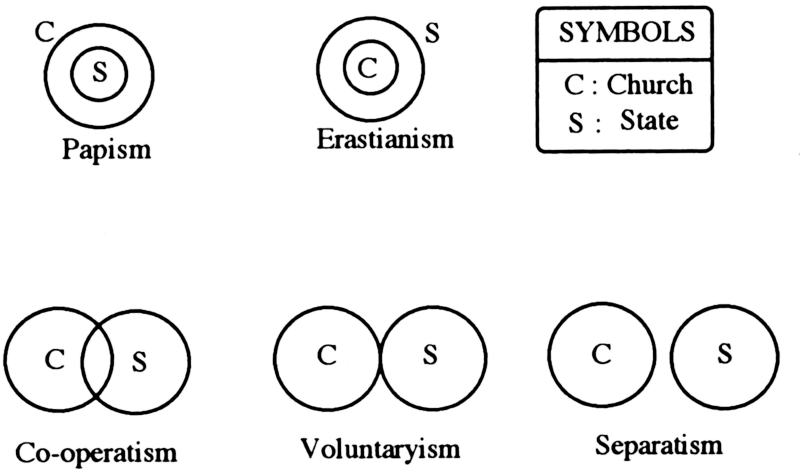
Separatism is another term we have invented to describe yet another system of belief which had existed since the days of the Donatists in fifth century, and was re-asserted by the Anabaptists during the Reformation.[6] Just as Presbyterian writers have contributed largely to the confutation of Independency with Congregationalism, they have also contributed to the confutation of Voluntaryism with Separatism. Voluntaryism, we contend, is the correct and biblical view, occupying the golden mean between Co-operatism and Separatism. To appreciate the differences and similarities between these three, it seems best to begin our discussion with Voluntaryism.[7] The visual representation of the different systems below will help us in our discussion.

3.4.1 Voluntaryism

The first characteristic of Voluntaryism is *the separation of church and state*. The church and the state are two co-equal and independent powers. Both are ordained by God (Rom. 13:1-7; Mt. 22:21). Each is supreme in its own sphere of rule, and in the execution of its functions. Each is answerable to God, and each obliged to exercise its functions according to the word of God. 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

[6] W. Cunningham, Vol. 2, p. 560.

[7] This must not be confused with the philosophical system called *Voluntarism* which asserts the superiority or importance of the exercise of the will to the deliberations of reason. See EDT, pp. 1147-1148.



and activities of the church. This would include the possibility of the church teaching the state biblical principles of law – especially with regard to religion, ethics and morality.

This state of equality, independence, and the possibility of mutual benefit between church and state has been described as *the co-ordination of powers*. Note that the lawfulness of each deriving benefits from the other, and even of each *voluntarily* contributing to the good of the other, is not the same as the alliance of the two authorities. Alliance, or co-operation, in matters that are strictly under the jurisdiction of one or the other of the authorities will necessarily destroy true independence. A similar situation will be encountered when we consider the issue of the communion of churches, in which true independence of the churches is destroyed when *government* is confused with *fellowship*. The co-ordination of powers may be best understood by a consideration of the next two elements of Voluntaryism.

The second characteristic of Voluntaryism is *the mutual subordination of persons*. There is the recognition that an individual may be a member of both the realm of the church as well as that of the state without there being a conflict of interest or loyalty. A believer may be a member of a church at the same time that he is a citizen of a political entity. He may even hold office as a civil magistrate.

Members and office-bearers of the church are, in common with other men, subject in all civil things to the authorities that exist.

The third characteristic of Voluntaryism, which gives it its name, is *the voluntary nature of the efforts of individuals to promote the cause of God and the kingdom of Christ*. William Cunningham describes it as "the principle that an obligation lies upon individuals to labour, in the willing application of their talents, influence, and worldly substance, for the advancement of the cause of God and the kingdom of Christ."[8] Of course, many non-believers do not recognise this obligation that God has placed upon them, but the fact of the existence of that obligation remains (e.g. Rom. 1:18-2:16). Men are creatures, living in God's creation, by God's good pleasure. They are, consequently, held accountable to God for how they live. If this were not true, there would be no judgment and condemnation upon the wicked on the last day. The obligation, however, is to God. If unbelieving individuals voluntarily exert effort to promote the cause of truth, they are fulfilling an obligation they owe to God. It does not credit for them any righteousness that saves. The church may benefit from such efforts of unbelievers. However, the church must never expect or demand from, nor be obligated to, such unbelievers.

Voluntaryism was held by the early Particular Baptists. This may be ascertained from articles 48 to 51 of the 1644 Confession as well as chapters 21, 23 and 24 of the 1689 Confession. This should be the view of Reformed Baptists today, who claim adherence to the 1689 Confession.[9]

3.4.2 Separatism

The next system is best described by the name of Separatism. It advocates the separation of church and state, but carries this truth to an extreme. Church and state are two separate entities, both ordained by God, each having its own sphere of influence and power, and each not coming into conjunction with the other in any way at all. It denies the mutual subordination of persons, claiming that a believer belongs to the realm of Christ's kingdom, and an unbeliever belongs to the realm of the world. A believer is not permitted to

[8] W. Cunningham, Vol. 2, p. 560.
[9] S. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition*, pp. 283-297.

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.

This extreme view is often taken to be the chief characteristic of Voluntaryism when, in fact, it is more a characteristic of Separatism. Cunningham's description of Voluntaryism should, therefore, be applied to Separatism instead – Separatism (not Voluntaryism) maintains that "the only relation that ought to subsist between the state and the church – between the civil government and religion – is that of entire separation; or, in other words, ... that nations, as such, and civil rulers in their official capacity, *not only are not bound, but are not at liberty*, to interfere in any religious matters, or *to seek to promote the welfare of the church of Christ*, as such."[10] (Italics added.)

This was the view held by the Donatists in the fifth century, and by the Anabaptists during the Reformation.[8,11] The Anabaptists were generally milder than the Donatists, requiring in their confessions of faith that a believer should honour the state as an institution of God, and be subject and obedient to it in all things that do not contradict the law of God.[12] In contrast, many Donatists of the earlier years were forced by circumstances to be hostile to the persecuting civil authorities.[13]

Separatism is upheld today by many Congregationalists of the Fundamentalist persuasion, and also by the Mennonites.

3.4.3 Co-operatism

Co-operatism claims to uphold all the three principles of Voluntaryism, namely the separation of church and state, the mutual subordination of persons, and the voluntary nature of efforts to promote the cause of God and the kingdom of Christ. It, however, modifies all three principles so that, in reality, a different system subsists.

[10] W. Cunningham, Vol. 1, p. 391.

[11] W. Klassen, pp. 244-246.

[12] See, for example, Articles 37 & 38 of the *Waterland Confession*, and Articles 35 & 36 in *A Short Confession, 1610*, in W. Lumpkin, pp. 63-64, 111-112.

[13] NIDCC, p. 308.

The church and the state are regarded as co-equal and independent, as in Voluntaryism, but the lawfulness and obligation to establish a friendly alliance between the two is also asserted. Consider these statements by Cunningham:

> "the existence of this original distinctiveness and independence (of church and state), and the necessity of its being always maintained, *are not inconsistent with, and do not necessarily obstruct or prevent, the formation of union or friendly alliance between them.*"[14]
>
> "...the relation of the civil and ecclesiastical authorities, *even when they are united together*, should be regulated throughout by the principle of their distinctness from, and independence of, each other."[15]

We have added the italics in the above quotes to emphasise the point that more is asserted than the plain separation of church and state. This had been the position of Presbyterians like John Calvin and George Gillespie.[16] The Presbyterians like to call this the principle of coordinate authorities, when in reality it is the advocation of co-operation between the two authorities. It should be noted that this principle of cooperation arises from a belief in the national establishments of religion. This is the belief that it is right to have a state church. Commenting on the voluntary nature of the efforts of men to promote the cause of God, Cunningham says:

> "Of course no defender of the principle of national establishments of religion ever questioned the truth of the voluntary principle in this its proper sense. The true ground of difference is just this, – that we who hold to the principle of national establishments of religion extend this general obligation to nations and their rulers, while those who are opposed to us limit it to individuals; so that the voluntary principle, in the only sense in which we reject and oppose it, – and in the only sense, consequently, in which it forms a subject of fair and honourable controversy, – is a mere limitation of the sphere

[14] W. Cunningham, Vol. 1, p. 395.
[15] W. Cunningham, Vol. 1, p. 396.

> of this obligation to promote the cause of God and the kingdom of Christ – a mere negation that the obligation in this respect which attaches to individuals, extends also to nations and their rulers."[6]

It is of interest to note the manner by which James Bannerman argues for co-operation between church and state.[17] He begins by showing that the church and the state are essentially distinct and mutually independent. We would have no problem with that. He proceeds from there to argue for the *possibility* and *lawfulness* of a connection and friendly co-operation between the two. This is the thin end of the wedge. Arguments, both correct and questionable ones, are employed which do not convincingly prove the point. In the next stage, he attempts to prove that the church and the state have *a duty* to seek a friendly alliance or connection. The arguments used are even weaker than those used in the previous stage. Next comes the *coup de grace*, the finishing stroke. He attempts to show the *necessity* of connection between church and state! From the *possibility and lawfulness* of alliance, he ends with the *duty and necessity* of such an alliance. This is a classic case of the *a fortiori* method of argumentation used in a dubious way.[18]

Clearly, major adjustments have been made to the principles of Voluntaryism so that the separation of church and state is no more true separation, the mutual subordination of persons is no more mutual subordination, and the voluntary nature of efforts to promote the cause of God is no more voluntary. It is incorrect to say that Presbyterians hold to the principle of co-ordinate authorities. The principle of co-ordinate authorities is just another name for the separation of church and state as upheld in Voluntaryism. Presbyterians hold to a *system* of belief on church-state relationship that is best described as Co-operatism.

[16] G. Gillespie, pp.120-124.

[6] W. Cunningham, Vol. 2, p. 560.

[17] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, pp. 97-148.

[18] The method by which an assertion is proven by building up one argument upon another.

3.4.4 Liberty of conscience

We have shown that the principle of co-operation upheld in traditional Presbyterianism is closely allied to the belief in the national establishments of religion. This is not a mere assertion on our part, but is freely owned by Presbyterians like William Cunningham.

It may easily be shown that the belief in the national establishment of religion is but one manifestation of a more general problem, namely sacralism, that is, a territorial view of the church. This was an idea that was carried over from the Roman Catholic Church into all the Reformed churches, except those of the Baptists. All infants born to believing parents in a certain territory were regarded as members of the church in that territory. Since church and state were intertwined, the power of the state could be harnessed to persecute those who were branded "heretics" for repudiating infant baptism. All these errors are thus linked together inextricably – sacralism, infant baptism, co-operation between church and state, denials of liberty of conscience and freedom of religion, and the repression of "heretics" by force.

The whole gamut of errors that spring out of sacralism are actually linked to the Presbyterian understanding, wrongly called "covenant theology", of the covenant that God made with Abraham. The national establishment of religion may be justified only by appealing to the example of the theocratic nation of Israel. At bottom line, all these errors arise from a "flat theology", which fails to take into consideration the progressive nature of revelation and the proper relation between the Old and the New Testaments. Leonard Verduin has convincingly shown that any form of alliance between church and state will inevitably lead to the birth of a monster-hybrid that practises all the evils associated with it.[19]

Classic Presbyterian documents such as the Westminster Confession (Chapter 23, paragraph 3) and the Belgic Confession (Article 36) contain clear statements to the effect that the civil authority has the power to suppress blasphemies and heresies. The Cambridge Platform of 1648, a document of the paedobaptist Independents in America, also gives to the civil authority the power to restrain and punish idolatry, blasphemy, heresy, and the like (Chapter 15, paragraph 8).[20] It is no secret that well-known Reformers like Calvin

[19] L. Verduin, *The Anatomy of a Hybrid*.

and Beza maintained the lawfulness of putting heretics to death.[21] John Calvin's approval of the execution of Servetus remain a stigma to the reputation of this famous man. Independents, of paedobaptist persuasion, in America had actively persecuted Baptists, much to the embarassment of their counterparts in England.[22]

Since these errors are inextricably linked together, the adherence to one of them tends to lead to the adherence of the others. Conversely, the more these errors are deliberately rejected, the closer one comes to the principles of Voluntaryism upheld in Independency. In our view, John Owen was an inconsistent Independent because of clinging on to infant baptism. He held to a clearer view on religious freedom compared to John Cotton, another paedobaptist Independent, who believed also in the alliance between church and state. The New England Independents, who shared the same views as John Cotton, ultimately turned Presbyterian by the adoption of the Saybrook Platform, in 1708.[23]

We maintain that while Papism and Erastianism deny the headship of Christ in an explicit way, Co-operatism deny the headship of Christ in an implicit way. This is true from various considerations.

First, we note the truth that the Lord Jesus Christ has given the local church all the power and authority needed for its government. This truth is stated clearly in Chapter 26, paragraph 7, of the 1689 Confession. It follows that to enter into alliance with the state, with the view that it may promote the cause of God and the kingdom Christ, is to deny the sufficiency of the church. This would be to deny the authority and power of Christ and, therefore, also the headship of Christ.

Then, we consider the truth that God is alone Lord of the conscience. This is stated in Chapter 21, paragraph 2, of the 1689 Confession. The Lord rules His people by bringing His word to bear on the conscience of His people. A man must be allowed to believe and act according to his conscience. That there are limits to true liberty of conscience no one will deny. The exercise of one's liberty should not be allowed to encroach on the liberty of others – in the disruption of civil justice or public peace, or in threatening violence

[20] I. Murray, *The Reformation of the Church*, p. 271.
[21] W. Cunningham, Vol. 1, p. 398.
[22] P. Toon, p. 162.
[23] I. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, pp. 16-18.

to others. True liberty of conscience, however, must not be confused with mere toleration. The limits of the liberty of conscience must not be confused with the limitations imposed upon it. When the principles of Voluntaryism are not upheld, there can be no true liberty of conscience. To deny the liberty of conscience to others would be to deny the lordship of God over all men, and the headship of Christ over His people.

What of modern Presbyterianism? America was founded on the principles of the separation of church and state and the true liberty of conscience. This was largely achieved through the agitation and influence of Baptists, the most notable of whom were Roger Williams and Isaac Backus.[24] As we have seen, paedobaptists of both Presbyterian and Independent persuasions were their persecutors. When a National Constitution for the United States was adopted in 1787, all hopes of establishing a state church vanished. With the adoption of the First Amendment to the Constitution in I789, true liberty of conscience was established in the land.

Under these circumstances, Presbyterians had to re-adjust their view on church-state relationship. The Westminster Confession was revised in 1788 so as to teach the separation of church and state.[25] Those who adopted the Belgic Confession had, similarly, to put a disclaimer to the offensive Article 36, and declare in its stead the belief in the separation of church and state, as well as the liberty of conscience. They further repudiated the idea of the established church and advocated the autonomy of the churches.[26]

Presbyterians of later days have generally advocated the principles of separation of church and state and the liberty of conscience. Charles Hodge, writing in 1863, stated that "we have reason to rejoice in the recently discovered truth, that the church is independent of the state, and that the state best promotes her interests by letting her alone."[27] John Murray wrote along similar strains.[28] One cannot help but wish that these men would at the very least acknowledge the role played by the Baptists who, through much personal sufferings, brought about the recognition of these principles.

[24] J. Q. Adams, pp. 87-110.
[25] S. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition*, pp. 292-297.
[26] *The Three Forms of Unity*, p. 30.
[27] I. Murray, *The Reformation of the Church*, p. 119.
[28] J. Murray, Vol. 1, pp. 253-259.

We rejoice, nevertheless, to see signs of change coming upon many Presbyterian denominations. Voluntaryism is, after all, the truth upheld by Reformed Baptists! We only place on record here the fact that traditional Presbyterianism does not uphold the headship of Christ consistently because of upholding Co-operatism.

3.5 Summary

1 The doctrine of the headship of Christ over the church is important because upon it stand other doctrines related to church government. This principle is taught in such scriptures as Colossians 1:8, Ephesians 1:22-23, Ephesians 5:23, and John 18:36. The *universal* church is referred to in these passages, underlining the truth that Christ is head over *every* local church on earth.

2 As head of the church, Christ acts as the mediator between God and men – holding to the offices of prophet, priest, and king. Both the *number* and *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; and (iii) determining the extent of fellowship we might have with other churches.

3 The headship of Christ is explicitly denied in Papism and Erastianism. In the former, the pope is regarded as head of the church. In the latter, the reigning monarch is the head.

4 Apart from Papism and Erastianism, there are three other systems of belief on the relationship between church and state: Co-operatism, Voluntaryism, and Separatism. Voluntaryism maintains that the church and the state are equal and independent, each with its own God-given sphere of jurisdiction. Separatism takes the separation of church and state to one extreme, while Co-operatism destroys true independence and separation by advocating the lawfulness and obligation of alliance between church and state.

5 Co-operatism is linked to a string of errors which have manifested themselves in the history of the church. These included the harnessing of civil authorities to the promotion of the cause of God,

the practice of infant baptism, the denial of liberty of conscience, and the persecution of those who disagreed on such matters as infant baptism. Co-operatism is upheld in traditional Presbyterianism. The headship of Christ is denied implicitly.

6 Modern Presbyterians tend to accept Voluntaryism, the position of Reformed Baptists, in favour of Co-operatism. This means that the headship of Christ is accepted consistently. Congregationalism also accepts the headship of Christ, but tends to posit an extreme idea of the separation of church and state.

Four

RULE BY ELDERS

A congregation of God's people, properly constituted, is autonomous or self-ruling. Moreover, the sole headship of Christ over the church should be recognised, both in theory and in practice. Following on from these, we consider the principle of "rule by elders". Two elements are involved: first, that there is such a thing as rule 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

4.1.1 Church-power

If Jesus Christ is the head of the church, the power to rule the church must rest in Him and come from Him. He is the source of all ecclesiastical power. Power has been communicated to the churches so that they may carry out all that is required of them by the Lord. In order that this power may be exercised, officers are appointed in the church. John Owen distinguished between the *right* or *power* of the church, and the *authority* to execute the duties of office.

> "The things before mentioned are all of them acts of right and power, but not of authority. Wherefore the Lord Christ hath ordained offices, and appointed officers to be established in the church (Eph. 4:11-15). Unto these is

> all church authority granted; for all authority is an act of office-power, which is that which gives unto what is performed by the officers of the church the formal nature of authority."[1]

4.1.2 Source of authority

Where does the authority of the officers come from? From God? From the church? Or from both? This has been a matter of contention.

Prelacy holds to "apostolic succession" of one sort or another. The Church of Rome claims that the power of the keys was originally vested in Peter. It was passed on from him to the subsequent popes. This is the "series theory" of apostolic succession in which the papal office is passed on from person to person in one place, namely Rome. Other Episcopal churches, such as the Church of England, believe in the "conveyance theory", in which ecclesiastical power and authority are transmitted from the ordainer to the ordained.[2]

The early Presbyterians were of the view that the power of the keys lies with the visible catholic church "formally", and in the ministry "executively".[3] This continued to be the view of the Dissenting Brethren in the Westminster Assembly and became the view of the Independents. The settled view of the later Presbyterians was that the power and authority to rule belongs to the collective leadership of the eldership – either local, regional, or national. The Westminster Confession of Faith says, in Chapter 31, paragraph 3:

> "It belongeth to synods and councils ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of his church; to receive complaints in cases of mal-administration, and authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission, not only for their agreement with the word, but also for

[1] JO, Vol. 16, p. 37.
[2] A. A. Davies, p. 2.

> the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God, appointed thereunto in his word."

George Gillespie argued for the Presbyterian position by claiming that in Matthew 18:15-17 the word "church" refers to the elders who represent the congregation.[4] He argued that what is said of the elders in Deuteronomy 19:12, Joshua 20:4, and Exodus 12:21 is said of the congregation in Numbers 35:24, Joshua 20:6, and Exodus 12:3, respectively. This, however, is a typical case of the interpretation of Scripture by a "flat theology", in which no allowance is made for the progression and development of revelation from the Old Testament to the New. There is also a confusion of the *manner* of ruling with the *authority* of ruling. We would contend that those Old Testament passages actually support the position of Independency in which it is held that the power of rule lies in the congregation, while the authority of rule lies with the elders. Matthew 18:15-17 and the Old Testament passages quoted above also support the Independent practise of "rule by elders, with congregational consent". This preempts the discussion on the manner of ruling under the chapter, "Rule With Consent".

Congregationalism holds to the view that Christ has given power to the local church and it is the membership of the church that has the authority to rule. Decision-making is achieved by voting to procure a consensus of opinion from the church. Church officers are elected by the local congregations, so their office is limited to that local church alone. The office-bearers have the authority to exercise rule only by delegation from the church. The role of the minister as an ambassador of Christ is played down, while his position as a servant of the church is highlighted. "As the body hath power from the head, and the parts of the body have their power from the body: so the church which is Christ's body, hath power from Christ, and the eldership a part of the body hath power from the body."[5]

Independency holds to a position between Presbyterianism and Congregationalism. Like Congregationalism, it is believed that Christ gives the power of the keys to the church "immediately". Like Presbyterianism, this power is to be exercised by officers "instrumentally"

[3] A. A. Davies, pp. 3-4.
[4] G. Gillespie, pp. 187-197.
[5] A. Davies, p. 4-5.

or "actually". The 1689 Confession states this truth in Chapter 26, paragraph 7:

> "To each of these churches thus gathered, according to His mind declared in His word, He hath given all that power and authority, which is in any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which He hath instituted for them to observe; with commands and rules for the due and right exerting, and executing of that power."

Unlike Congregationalism, church officers do not have their authority delegated by the church. Instead, that authority is communicated *from* Christ immediately, and *through* the church. Ministers are not only servants of the church but also ambassadors of Christ. Unlike Presbyterianism, the officers have no authority beyond their congregation because they are appointed only to that congregation. Moreover, congregational consent in decision-making is needed in Independency while it is not in Presbyterianism. Owen stated these truths as follows:

> "But as this whole church-power is committed unto the whole church by Christ, so all that are called unto the peculiar exercise of any part of it, by virtue of office-authority, do receive that authority from Him by the only way of the communication of it, namely by His word and Spirit, through the ministry of the the church."[6]

The above discussion on the power and authority to govern the church is not a mere academic exercise. It lays at the very heart of our understanding of the concept of "office", of the officers in the church, and of the manner by which the church is to be governed.

4.2 The Concept Of "Office"

4.2.1 "Office" defined

The concept of "office" is a time-honoured one. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines an office as, "A position to which certain

[6] JO, Vol. 16, p. 36.

duties are attached, especially a place of trust, authority, or service under constituted authority." All the historic confessions of faith uphold the truth that Christ, in His role as Mediator, holds the offices of prophet, priest and king. The word "office" itself may not have been used in the Bible, but the concept of it is clearly taught.

If Christ has given power to His churches, and there are duties to perform, then there must be an office ordained by Him to perform them. John Owen said that "an ecclesiastical office is an especial power given by Christ unto any person or persons for the performance of especial duties belonging unto the edification of the church in an especial manner."[7]

4.2.2 "Office" denied

Through the centuries there have been various attempts made to deny the idea of office and authority. In the early seventeenth century, the Quakers denied, among other things, the power of order and government in the Christian Church.[8] They practised instead religious democracy in their monthly meetings.

In the late seventeenth century, the Latitudinarians within the Church of England also denied the special appointment of church government as a divine institution, holding that we have no warrant for it in the word of God, and that it is a matter of mere human arrangement. It has been correctly pointed out that they were the precursors of the Broad Churchmen of the nineteenth century, and of the modernists and radicals of more recent Anglican divinity.[9]

In the nineteenth century the Plymouth Brethren, with their emphasis on "the priesthood of all believers", stressed the exercise of gifts and downplayed the idea of office.

Modernists of the twentieth century have continued on this line of argument.[10] A. Harnack quotes with approval the words of another, "The rise of ecclesiastical law and the constitution of the church is an apostasy from the conditions intended by Jesus Himself and originally realized." The position of these men is that the apostles were not in any sense intended to be ecclesiastical officers but merely bearers of a message; that they were not vested with author-

[7] JO, Vol. 4, p. 438.
[8] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 191.
[9] EDT, p. 622.

ity over life and doctrine but merely endowed with special spiritual gifts; or that, if they exercised any authority at all, it was not official but organic, spiritual, ethical.

The "charismatic movement", which arose in the early 1960s, places a heavy emphasis on the "participation" of every Christian and the exercise of the individual's gifts. The orderly meetings found in churches in which the ministers lead are contemptuously brushed aside as manifestations of the "one-man-show". The para-church organisations that proliferated in these recent years have also downplayed the concept of office.

The flow has not always been in one direction. The Irvingites of the nineteenth century emphasised the restoration of the extraordinary offices together with extraordinary gifts. This is followed today by the "restorationist movement", which must not be confused with the charismatic movement.[11]

4.2.3 "Office" upheld

The idea of "office" is today called into question by those who should have known better.[12] It is claimed that, "When we turn back to Scripture we not only discover an absence of the whole notion of 'office', we also find an emphasis on spiritual gifts." This, however, is far from the truth. While it is true that the word "office" has been wrongly used at some points in the King James Version (Rom. 11:13; 12:4), the notion of office is clearly taught in many places.

For example, in 1 Timothy 3:1 we have, "If a man desires the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work." W. E. Vine said, "the word 'office' has nothing to represent it in the original." But he went on to say, "the phrase literally is 'overseership'."[13] In other words, Vine was not denying the concept of office, whether we translate the original Greek word *episkopê* as "overseership" or "the office of a bishop". W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich confirmed this by translating the word as, "position or office as an overseer".[14] The New King James Version translates the verse as, "If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work." The same word *episkopê* is used in Acts 1:20 in reference to the position of an apostle. Vine also

[10] W. Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, p. 195.
[11] B. Beevers, RT 82, 1984.
[12] C. Pond, pp. 42-44.

stated that the word *hieratia* in Luke 1:9 and Hebrews 7:5 denotes "priest's office".

If the concept of office is denied we would have to rewrite all the books on Systematic Theology. Pressed to its logical conclusion, the traditional teaching on Christ as the Mediator, exercising His offices as prophet, priest, and king would have to be rejected. The ministers listed in Ephesians 4:11 would have no authority to execute their duties, since "all authority is an act of office-power" (Owen). No qualifications for the offices of elder and deacon would need to be listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, since there would be no offices to be filled. And no ordination of these overseers and deacons would be needed either.

William Hendriksen pointed out that "there is no scriptural warrant whatever for the tendency to get rid of the idea 'office' and 'authority', for these concepts are clearly implied in Mt. 16:18, 19; Jn. 20:23; Acts 14:23; 20:28; 2 Cor. 6:3, 4; 10:8; 1 Tim. 1:18; 3:1, 5; 4:14; 5:17; 2 Tim. 4:1, 2; Tit. 1:5-9; 3:10."[10]

Over against the pressure from many quarters today to deny the concept of office, we must all the more uphold it. In so doing, are we in any way stifling the gifts of individuals in the church? We answer in the negative. There is no need to posit an "either or" situation here. Both offices and gifts are clearly taught in the Bible and are equally needful to the church. George Smeaton said this of "gifts of an ordinary character... given for the permanent advantage of the church":

> "Some of them are gifts of office – and of every conceivable variety – for acting on the mind of others; while the general body of Christians are supplied with gifts and endowments, wealth and influence, which the Holy Spirit induces them to wield for the common benefit. The permanence of the church does not depend on OFFICES ALONE, as Irving and Lohe represented the matter, NOR ON GIFTS ALONE, as the Plymouth Brethren will have it, but on both conjoined."[15]

[13]Vine, see under "office".
[14]Arnt & Gingrich.
[10]W. Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, p. 195.
[15]G. Smeaton, pp. 276-277.

To the Puritans, office meant authority, gift, and duty (that is, a definite sphere of responsibility).[16] An office will be filled by one who has been given the necessary gift to fulfil his God-given duty, but gifts may also be possessed by those who are not called to office. John Murray said:

> "For office there must be the corresponding gift, but not all gifts bestowed by the Spirit and necessarily exercised within the unity of the body of Christ and for its edification, invest the participants with office in the sense in which this applies to apostles, prophets, pastors, rulers in the church, and the diaconate."[17]

The concept of office is important to us for two immediate reasons. First, it carries with it the truth that a generic word may take on a technical meaning when used in connection with an office. The word "apostle" basically means "one who is sent out", and is so used in Acts 14:14. When used in reference to Paul and the twelve disciples of Christ, it takes on a technical sense with the connotation of office. The word "elder" means someone who is senior in age (for example, in Lk. 15:25; Acts 2:17; Heb. 11:2). When used in the technical sense it refers to the leaders of the Jewish nation (Num. 11:16; Dt. 27:1), the Sanhedrin (Mt. 16:21; 26:47), or the leaders of the church (Acts 20:17, 28; Tit. 1:5, 7).

Secondly, our understanding of the concept of office helps us to see that an office is inseparably connected with authority, gift and duty, while gift and duty may be present in an individual without there being an office. The ramifications of this are many. For example, we would understand that the gift of prophecy could be possessed by people who were not prophets (Acts 19:6; 21:9). We would understand also that while the extraordinary office of evangelist has ceased, its functions continue to be there for the church to fulfill (Mt. 28:18-20; Rom. 10:14-15).

[16] A. Davies, p. 1.
[17] J. Murray, Vol. 2, p. 358.

4.3 Officers In The Church

The ascended Christ has given officers to the church (Eph. 4:7-16). It has long been recognised that these officers fall into two general categories: extraordinary and ordinary ones.

Who are the extraordinary officers, and who the ordinary ones? John Owen defined an extraordinary officer by four characteristics: (i) An extraordinary call unto an office; (ii) An extraordinary power given to him to fulfil the function peculiar to that office; (iii) Extraordinary gifts for the exercise and discharge of that power; and, (iv) Extraordinary work given to him in terms of its extent and measure, requiring unusual labour, effort, zeal, and self-denial.[18] The extraordinary officers included the apostles, prophets, and evangelists.

4.3.1 Apostles

Of the apostles, twelve were originally appointed, to correspond with the number of the tribes of Israel (Mt. 19:27-28; Rev. 21:14), to whom they were specially sent (Mt. 10:5-6). After the death of Judas, Matthias was chosen to replace him. This was before, although near to, Pentecost, when the preaching of the gospel was still confined to the Jews. The thirteenth apostle, Paul, was afterward added and specially sent to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:7-9; Acts 9:15; 22:17-21; 2 Cor. 10:16). The qualifications of an apostle were: (i) A personal commission from Christ (Acts 1:24; Gal. 1:1); (ii) An actual sight of the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:22-23; 1 Cor. 9:1); (iii) A direct reception of the gospel from Christ, without human intervention (Gal. 1:11-20); and (iv) The possession of supernatural gifts together with the power to confer these gifts and the Holy Spirit to others (Acts 8:14-17; 2 Cor. 12:12).

The tasks of the apostles were to introduce Christianity to the world by the proclamation of the gospel, the establishment of the first churches, and the inscripturation of the New Testament Scripture. The office ceased once the tasks were accomplished and the apostles passed away. Barnabas and others were also called apostles (Acts 14:14; 1 Cor. 9:5; Gal. 1:19), but only in the sense that they were the "sent out ones", as the word means. In modern parlance, they would be called "missionaries".

[18] JO, Vol. 4, p. 439.

4.3.2 Prophets

According to John Owen, the word "prophet" may be used in reference to: (i) an extraordinary officer; or (ii) to an ordinary officer or a person without office who prophesies. The word "prophecy" may be used in reference to: (i) the extraordinary gift of either foretelling or forthtelling, or both, of special revelation from God; or (ii) the ordinary gift of preaching from God's word.

On the extraordinary gift of prophecy, Owen said, in reference to the four daughters of Philip who prophesied (in Acts 21:9), "to prophesy is nothing but to declare the hidden and secret things by virtue of immediate revelation."[19] Commenting on the phrase, "to another prophecy", in 1 Corinthians 12:10, he said, "I take it here in its largest sense, both as it signifies a faculty of prediction, or foretelling things future upon divine revelation, or an ability to declare the mind of God from the word, by the especial and immediate revelation of the Holy Ghost. The first of these was more rare, the latter more ordinary and common."[20]

Commenting on Romans 12:6, "Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith", Owen said:

> "Prophecy here can intend nothing but teaching or preaching, in the exposition and application of the word; for an external rule is given unto it, in that it must be done according to the 'proportion of faith', or the sound doctrine of faith revealed in the Scripture. And this ever was, and will ever continue to be, the work and duty of the ordinary teachers of the church, whereunto they are enabled by the gifts of Christ, which they receive by the Holy Ghost (Eph. 4:7), as we shall see more afterward. And hence also those who are not called unto office, who have yet received a gift enabling them to declare the mind of God in the Scripture unto the edification of others, may be said to 'prophesy'."[19]

[19] JO, Vol. 4, p. 452.
[20] JO, Vol. 4, p. 469.
[19] JO, Vol. 4, p. 452.

The following combinations of persons and gifts are, therefore, possible, covering all the instances where prophets or prophecies are mentioned in the New Testament:[21]

i Extraordinary officer with extraordinary gift (e.g. 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11; Acts 11:28-30; 13:2; 20:22-23; 21:10-11).

ii Extraordinary gift to individuals without office (e.g. Acts 19:6; 21:9, cf. Mt. 26:68 & Lk. 22:64; 1 Cor. 12:28, referring to the teachers and tongue-speakers; 14:29-30 cf. 30, 37).

iii Ordinary office with ordinary gifts (Rm. 12:6), and ordinary gifts to individuals without office, that is, the gift of teaching or preaching (1 Cor. 11:4, 5).

4.3.3 Evangelists

The term "evangelist" occurs only three times (Acts 21:8; Eph. 4:11; 2 Tim. 4:5) and seems to designate the itinerant ministry of men such as Apollos, Timothy, Titus, Silas, Stephen and Philip. They acted as delegates of the apostles and their ministry was not limited to any one church. Their work included the preaching of the gospel, the confirmation of the gospel by miraculous deeds, and the settling and completing of those churches that had been founded by the apostles (Acts 6:8; 8:6, 7, 13; Tit. 1:5). With reference to the office of evangelist, John Owen was of the view that "where no command, no rule, no authority, no directions, are given for the calling of any officer, there that office must cease, as doth that of the apostles, who could not be called but by Jesus Christ."[22] Some good men, sensing the continuing need of sending out gospel preachers, have argued for the ordination of teachers and evangelists for this task today.[23,24] This recourse, however, is rather unnecessary.

Although the *office* of evangelist has ceased, we note that the *functions* of the evangelist continue. This is clear from a number of considerations. First, the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20, and Acts 1:8, is given to the church as an abiding ordinance. Second,

[21] JO, Vol. 4, p. 451.
[22] JO, Vol. 4, pp. 449-449.
[23] H. Harvey, p. 68.
[24] J. L. Dagg, pp. 264-265.

there are also abiding principles underlying the practice of the Lord in sending out disciples two by two to preach (Mt. 10:5-15; Mk. 6:7-13; Lk. 10:1-24). Although these missions were "dispensational conditioned" in that the disciples were commanded to go only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel", the idea of being sent forth officially on the task of preaching is clearly intended to be continued (Rom. 10:13-17). Finally, there are the examples set by the apostolic churches in sending out preachers, which we are to follow (Acts 13:1-3; 16:1-3; 2 Cor. 8:18, 22; Col. 1:7). Churches must harness their members to evangelise. Following the instructions given to Timothy to "do the work of an evangelist" (2 Tim. 4:5), pastors must preach beyond their congregations with the intention of founding churches. Moreover, as suitable men are available, they must be sent out to preach and plant churches.

4.3.4 Teachers

John Owen believed that a teacher in the church is set in a distinct office, but "his office is of the same kind with that of the pastor", differing only in gifts and the work allocated to each. He admitted that the difference between them is so small as to be practically indistinguishable.[25] It would appear that Owen propounded this view to allow for the possibility of teachers being appointed in the church to help the pastor in his work of teaching, but not in his work of ruling.[26] This he did on the basis of Galatians 4:6, "Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches", and 1 Corinthians 4:15, "For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers". It would have been better not to regard such teachers in the church, who are not elders, as *occupying an office*. The due recognition and setting apart of a person for a *task* need not be equated with the appointment of a person to *office*.

What Owen was basically contending for is the need for a person to be duly recognised and appointed for a certain task that is performed on a regular basis, especially that of teaching God's word. This is with the view of avoiding disorderliness and upholding the high calling of ministering God's word. After asserting that a man

[25] JO, Vol. 16, p. 103.
[26] JO, Vol. 16, p. 104.

must have a lawful outward call before he takes on the pastoral office, Owen added the following words:

> "Yet there are three things that are to be annexed unto this assertion, by way of limitation; as, – (i) Many things performed by virtue of office, in a way of authority, may be performed by others not called to office, in a way of charity. Such are the moral duties of exhorting, admonishing, comforting, instructing, and praying with and for one another, (ii) Spiritual gifts may be exercised unto the edification of others without office-power, where order and opportunity do require it. But the constant exercise of spiritual gifts in preaching, with a refusal of undertaking a ministerial office, or without any design so to do upon a lawful call, cannot be approved. (iii) The rules proposed concern only ordinary cases, and the ordinary state of the church; extraordinary cases are accompanied with a warranty in themselves for extraordinary actings and duties."[27]

Concerning teachers who do not hold office, Owen said:

> "Take teachers... for those who are only so, and have no further interest in office-power, and there is no doubt but that there may be as many of them in any church as are necessary unto its edification, and ought so to be. And a due observation of this institution would prevent the inconvenience of men's preaching constantly who are in no office of the church; for although I do grant that those who have once been regularly and solemnly set apart or ordained unto the ministry have the right of constant preaching inherent in them, and the duty of it incumbent on them, though they may be separated from those churches wherein and unto whom they were peculiarly ordained, yet for men to give themselves up constantly unto the work of teaching by preaching the gospel who never were set apart by the church thereunto, I know not that it can be justified."[28]

[27] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 55-56.

When such a teacher is appointed an elder, he is substantially the same as a pastor. Owen said:

> "He who is peculiarly called to be a teacher, with reference unto a distinction from a pastor, may yet at the same time be called to be an elder also; that is, to be a teaching elder. And where there is in any officer a concurrence of both these, – a right unto rule as an elder and power to teach or preach the gospel, – there is the same office and office-power, for the substance of it, as there is in the pastor."[26]

That the early Particular Baptists were of the same mind as Owen on the position of teachers and preachers who are not ministers or elders is clear from the 1689 Confession, Chapter 26, paragraph 11:

> "Although it be incumbent on the bishops or pastors of the churches, to be instant in preaching the word, by way of office, yet the work of preaching the word is not so peculiarly confined to them but that others also gifted and fitted by the Holy Spirit for it, and approved and called by the church, may and ought to perform it (Acts 11:19-21; 1 Pet. 4:10-11)."

Benjamin Keach (1640-1704), the well-known Particular Baptist who was one of the signatories of the 1689 Confession, laboured for twenty years under the name and title of Teacher during the pastorate of William Rider. Upon the decease of the latter, Keach was appointed as the pastor. In his pastorate, the church appointed Benjamin Stinton to assist the Pastor as a Teacher. On the removal of Keach, Stinton succeeded to the pastorate, and the church was spared the misery of long remaining without a pastor, or seeking some unknown person from outside the church. Upon such a precedent, C. H. Spurgeon attempted to revive the practice of having teachers to assist him.[29]

[28] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 104-105.
[26] JO, Vol. 16, p. 104.
[29] C. H. Spurgeon, Vol. 2, p. 77.

4.3.5 Elders

The continental reformers and the British Puritans identified four permanent officers: pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons.[30] Many, including the early Separatists, added a fifth, namely "widows" or "relievers", either as a distinct office or as female assistants to the deacons.[31] Based on 1 Timothy 5:9-10, these widows were often specified as women of sixty years of age at the least.

The Westminster divines were disagreed on whether the ruling elders are presbyters.[32] Their lack of unanimity was to lead to further agitation over the same matter among the Presbyterians two centuries later.

The Independents were all agreed that elders are bishops. They further agreed that there are two sorts of elders: pastors and teachers who attend chiefly to the ministry of the word, and ruling elders who share the work of ruling the church with the pastors and teachers. The Cambridge Platform of 1648, which expressed the views of the Independents in America, states in Chapter 6, paragraph 4:

> "Of elders (who are also called bishops) some attend chiefly to the ministry of the word, as pastors and teachers; others attend especially unto rule, who are therefore called ruling elders."

In chapter 7, paragraph 1, the same document states:

> "The ruling elder's office is distinct from the office of pastor and teacher. The ruling elders are not so called to exclude the pastors and teachers from ruling, but because ruling and governing is common to these with the other; whereas attending to teach and preach the word is peculiar unto the former."

The Independents in Britain were of the same view. John Owen spoke representatively, saying:

> "The officers of the church in general are of two sorts, 'bishops and deacons' (Phil. 1:1); and their work is distributed into 'prophecy and ministry' (Rom. 12:6, 7).

[30] A. Davies, p. 6.
[31] I. Murray, *Reformation of the Church*, p. 199.
[32] I. Murray, *Ruling Elders*.

> The bishops or elders are of two sorts: (i) Such as have authority to teach and administer the sacraments, ... and of ruling, ... and (ii) Some have only power for rule, ... Those of the first sort are distinguished into pastors and teachers."[33]

The Particular Baptists agreed with John Owen that teachers who are appointed to be elders are substantially the same as pastors. However, they saw no purpose in maintaining too fine a distinction between the pastor and the teacher when they are both elders who perform substantially the same duties. The statements in the 1689 Confession are consequently tidier than their counterparts in the Savoy Platform. Instead of mentioning "pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons" as the continuing officers in the church, the 1689 Confession mentions only "bishops or elders, and deacons" (Chapter 26, paragraph 8). Similarly, instead of mentioning the appointment of a person unto the office of "pastor, teacher, or elder", the 1689 Confession simply mentions the office of "bishop or elder" (paragraph 9).

Like the other Independents, the Particular Baptists believed that all pastors are elders, but not all elders are pastors. Chapter 26, paragraph 10 of the 1689 Confession defines the pastors as those who are supported full-time by their churches in the ministry of the word and prayer. Paragraph 11 equates the pastors with the bishops.

A correct appreciation of these beliefs of the early Particular Baptists is important in view of the attempts of some Reformed Baptists to propagate the idea that all elders are pastors.

4.3.6 Deacons

The office of deacon is also taught in the Bible (1 Tim 3:8-13; Phil. 1:1). It is widely accepted that Acts 6:1-6 records the first appointment of deacons in the New Testament church, although the word "deacon" is not used there.[34] Deacons help the elders in the management of the temporal and practical affairs of the church so that the latter may concentrate on "prayer and the ministry of the word". This is clear from the Acts 6 account. There, the apostles were functioning as elders of the church in Jerusalem (cf. 1 Pet. 5:1; 1 Jn. 1; 2

[33] JO, Vol. 16, p. 42.

Jn. 1; Gal. 2:9). The qualifications for the office of deacon are given in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, all of which are similar to those for eldership in that they have to do with the character and gifts of the persons. The noticeable difference is that, unlike elders, deacons need not possess the ability to teach.

The moot question is whether or not there is the office of deaconess, i.e. female deacons, in the Scripture. There are those who argue for the existence of such an office on the basis 1 Timothy 3:11 and Romans 16:1.[35] Suffice to say here that the noun "deaconess" is not found anywhere in the Bible. The word *gunê* is literally translated "woman" and denotes either a wife or a woman, whether married or not. There is no specific word for "wife" in Greek. As used in 1 Timothy 3:11, it most probably means the wives of the elders and deacons.

The word *diakonos* in Romans 16:1 denotes a servant and is so translated everywhere else in the New Testament (e.g. Mt. 20:26; Mk. 9:35; Rom. 15:8, etc.), except in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 and Philippians 1:1 where the *office* of deacon is obviously meant. This is an example of how a word with a generic meaning may take on a technical sense. Yet another technical sense appears when it is used in conjunction with the preaching of God's word, in which case it is often translated as "minister" in the English Bibles (e.g. Col. 1:25).

William Hendriksen argues that 1 Timothy 3:11 is a reference to women who, although not holding office, help the deacons in their task.[36] John Owen, together with other Independents and Particular Baptists, did not countenance the office of deaconess, as is clear from its omittance in the Savoy Declaration and the 1689 Confession.

4.4 Rulers In The Church

4.4.1 Rule by elders

Universal and absolute power is in the hand of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is described as having "the key of David" (Mt. 28:18; Rev. 3:7). This is an expression that is derived from the keys that were a sign of office-power in the families of the kings in the Old Testament (Isa.

[34] JO, Vol. 16, p. 145.
[35] RT 51.
[36] W. Hendriksen, *1 Timothy*.

22:22). The Lord has Himself communicated power to the churches so that they are able to carry out all that are needful for them (Mt. 16:19). Although Peter was alone addressed by the Lord in Matthew 16:19, it is clear that "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" were meant to be for the church, as the similar expression of "binding and loosening" in Matthew 18:17-18 shows.

The authority for the execution of this church-power is in the hand of the elders of the church. This is clear from the facts that:

i The *office* of elder or bishop has been ordained in the church. As the appointed officers, the elders have the right and authority to execute the power of office, "for all authority is an act of office-power".[1]

ii The *titles* of this office, namely "elders" and "overseers", speak of the authority to rule or govern. In the Old Testament, elders were leaders of the nation who ruled with Moses. In the New Testament, elders are overseers of the church (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Tim. 3:1-7 cf. Tit. 1:5-9).

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

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

v There are *examples* of elders taking the lead and governing the churches (Acts 13:1-3; 15:3, 4, 6, 22; 21:18).

John Owen said:

> "The rule and government of the church, or the execution of the authority of Christ therein, is in the hand of the elders. All elders in office have rule, and none have rule in the church but elders."[37]

[1] JO, Vol. 16, p. 37.
[37] JO, Vol. 16, p. 106.

4.4.2 Relationship between elders and deacons

The two continuing offices in the church are those of elders and deacons. This, however, does not mean that they are parallel offices, each having its own sphere of jurisdiction. In many churches today, there is a confusion over the offices and the roles of the officers. There are deacons who perform the functions of elders and are treated as elders. There are pastors whose ministries have been crippled by the undue assertiveness, and even insubordination, of certain deacons. In an age when there is an aversion to any suggestion of authority of one party over another, it needs to be asserted that there is a clear subordination of one office to the other. The notion of "office" implies authority. That the office of deacon is subordinate to that of elder is clear from the following considerations:

i In the original institution of this office, it was the then existing elders (who happened to be the twelve apostles) who took the initiative to propose the appointment of deacons. It was to them that the newly chosen deacons were presented, and it was the elders who prayed and laid hands on the deacons (Acts6:6). This shows that the deacons were subordinate to the elders.

ii After deacons were appointed to "serve tables", which included handling the collections (Acts 6:1), the elders did not abdicate their responsibility over this particular task. This is clear from Acts 11:30, when the disciples in Antioch sent relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. The relief was sent to the elders, and not to the deacons.

iii 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. It follows that the office of deacon must be subordinate to that of elder.

iv Also to be noted is the fact that priority was given to the appointment of elders and not deacons, a practice that is often reversed in many churches today. In Acts 14:23 we read of elders being appointed in each church, with no mention of the appointment of deacons. Similarly, Titus was instructed to appoint elders in

every city, with no mention of the appointment of deacons (Tit. 1:5).

v Another indication that deacons are subordinate to elders is seen in the fact that every time they are mentioned together, it is the elders who are mentioned first (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-13). Also to be noted is the fact that deacons are always mentioned together with elders while elders may not be mentioned with deacons (e.g. Acts 20:17-38; 1 Pet. 5:1-4; James 5:14).

Deacons serve in the church. Deacons are subordinate to the elders. However, because they occupy an office, they have the authority to carry out the work that pertains to that office. They are to take instructions from the elders and to report to them relative to the sphere of their service. The rights and power of deacons are confined to the church in which they are appointed. Any extraordinary collections from or for other churches, any dealings of whatever sort with other churches, are to be made and disposed by the elders (Acts 11:30). This, of course, does not rule out the possibility of deacons, and even other members of the church, being delegated these tasks (Acts 15:2, 22).

We may aptly summarise the relative roles of, and relationship between, elders and deacons by quoting John Owen:

> "Question: What is the duty of the deacons towards the elders of the church?
>
> Answer: Whereas the care of the whole church, in all its concernments, is principally committed unto the pastors, teachers, and ruling elders, it is the duty of the deacons, in the discharge of their office, – (i) To acquaint them from time to time with the state of the church, and especially of the poor, so far as it falls under their inspection; (ii) To seek and take their advice in matters of greater importance relating unto their office; (iii) To be assisting unto them in all the outward concerns of the church."[38]

[38] JO, Vol. 16, p. 151.

4.4.3 Female elders?

Scripture is clear that women are not to be appointed as rulers in the church nor to engage in any form of congregational teaching. To do so would be to go contrary to the created order of God (1 Cor. 11:3, 7-9; Eph. 5:22; 1 Pet. 3:1; 1 Tim. 2:13-14), to disobey the direct commands in the Bible (1 Cor. 11:1-16; 1 Tim. 2:12-15), and to act without the express warrant of Scripture (cf. 1 Tim 3:1-7 where only man is referred to).

The pastor's wife is not the assistant pastor, neither is she the pastoral advisor. While the ministries of some men have been destroyed by wives who are not supportive, the ministries of others have been wrecked by wives who are overbearing. Such women talk with vaunted authority, meddle into affairs that do not belong to their domain, and upset many by their assertiveness. They do well to emulate the spirit of Hannah and Sarah (1 Sam. 1; 1 Pet. 3:1-7).

It needs to be said, however, that the role of women in the ministry of the word has often been downplayed in many churches. Women were certainly active in gospel work, playing a supplementary and complementary role under the leadership of men or when accompanied by their husbands (Acts 18:26; Rom. 16:3-16; 1 Cor. 9:5; Phil. 4:3). Insufficient attention has been given to the training of older women in the church in order that they may be set apart to teach and minister more particularly to the younger women (Tit. 2:3-5; 1 Tim. 5:9-10). It is never good pastoral practice for elders to minister too closely to young women. The danger of getting emotionally involved with them is very real. When that happens, temptation and scandal lie just around the corner!

4.4.4 Rule in other systems

In Episcopacy, whether of the Roman Catholic or Anglican types, there is an hierarchy of individuals who rule over many congregations. In the Roman Catholic Church supreme power is vested in the pope. He sits above the cardinals, archbishops, and bishops. In the Church of England supreme power is vested in the monarch, who appoints the archbishops and bishops with the guidance of politicians in parliament. Each bishop is not an elder in a congregation, but rules over a number of churches in a diocese. "Rule by elders" of

a church is therefore not found in the Prelatic system.

Presbyterianism practices the principle of "rule by elders", although their concepts of the church and of church power are different from those of Independents. These differences manifest themselves in the *manner* of ruling the church. In Independency the elders rule by and with the consent of the church, while in Presbyterianism congregational consent is not needed.

Congregationalism does not practice rule by elders because of its belief that church power resides in, and is to be exercised by, the body of the church. The congregation makes decisions, and the pastor is at best the chairman in the congregational meeting. In many churches that practise Congregationalism today, the deacons perform the work of overseeing the flock. There are other churches that are ruled by an elected executive committee, and the pastor is relegated to the sole task of preaching. Also, it is not uncommon to find Christians who expect their pastor to perform the practical and temporal tasks that should rightly be done by the deacons. There is thus a confusion over either the offices or the roles of the officers.

4.5 Summary

1 All ecclesiastical power has its source in Jesus Christ, who is the head of the church. Christ has communicated power to the churches, to be executed by appointed officers.

2 The word "office" may not be found in the Bible, but the concept of office is clearly taught. There is pressure from many quarters to deny this concept. The fallacious claim is made that only the exercise of gifts is important in the church, and not the exercise of office-power. In reality, both are important.

3 The concept of office is important for at least two reasons. First, it means that a generic word may take on a technical meaning when applied to an office, for example, "apostle", "elder", etc. Second, it means that an office is inseparably connected with authority, gift and duty, while gift and duty need not be associated with office. There are important ramifications to this truth. For example, individuals may be set apart for the tasks of the evangelist or the teacher, without their appointment to those offices.

4 Two categories of officers have been given to the church: extraordinary and ordinary ones. The extraordinary officers, namely apostles, prophets and evangelists, have ceased while the ordinary ones, namely elders and deacons, continue.

5 The Particular Baptists believed that all pastors are elders, but not all elders are pastors. Pastors rule and teach, while ruling elders only rule.

6 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.

7 The authority to rule or govern the church is in the hand of the elders, not the deacons. The office of deacon is subordinate to that of elder. No female elders are taught in the Bible. However, the role of women in the ministry of the word should not be downplayed. Older women should be trained and set apart to teach and minister to the younger women in the church.

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

Five

THE PRIORITY OF THE MINISTRY

Two articles by Iain Murray appeared in the Banner of Truth magazine in 1983, the importance of which have not been truly appreciated. One was entitled "Ruling Elders – A Sketch of a Controversy."[1] The other was a two-part article entitled, "The Christian Ministry and the Challenge to its Continuance."[2]

In the second article, Iain Murray warned of the presence of forces that are working towards the demise of the Christian ministry, as it is traditionally understood. Alarming to us is the growing influence of the "absolute equality" theory of the eldership, propagated within Reformed Baptist circles, which is having exactly this effect of undermining the Christian ministry. What this theory is all about will become clear as we progress in this chapter and the two subsequent ones. For this reason alone, the priority of the ministry needs to be re-asserted with vigour and clarity today.

Furthermore, it is appropriate to introduce the principle of "the priority of the ministry" at this point since the chief way of ruling the church is by the law of Christ applied to the conscience of church members. John Owen rightly said, "The rule and law of the exercise of power in the elders of the church is the holy Scripture only."[3] There is thus a certain continuity in the treatment of this whole sub-

[1] I. Murray, BT 235.
[2] I. Murray, BT 237 & 238.

ject of the form of church government – the autonomy of the local church, the headship of Christ, rule by elders, and now *the priority of the ministry*.

5.1 The Priority Of The Ministry

This principle may be developed by a consideration of the primacy of the word of God, the primacy of preaching, the validity of full-time preachers, the doctrine of "the call", the concept of "office", and the necessity of clear leadership in the church of God.

5.1.1 The primacy of the word

The created order came into existence when God spoke. Beginning with Adam, God revealed Himself to mankind by the mode of speech.

From the beginning, the people of God were directed to the centrality and primacy of the word. "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the door-posts of your house and on your gates (Dt. 6:6-9)."

God's people revelled in His word, and sought comfort and guidance from it: "How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path (Ps. 119:103-105)."

The light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, reveal the attributes of God, yet they are not sufficient to lead fallen man to salvation. It is only by the hearing of God's word that man may come to saving faith in Christ (Rom. 10:17; Gal. 3:2; 1 Pet. 1:23). Christ, the only mediator between God and man, is Himself called *the Word*. By Him the old created order came into existence, by Him also came the new creation (Jn. 1 :1-3; 2 Cor. 5:17-18).

[3] JO, Vol. 16, p. 135.

A new convert needs to feed on the milk of the word (1 Pet. 2:2-3). He continues to need God's word for his spiritual growth (2 Pet. 3:18; Mt. 4:4; Heb. 5:12-14).

The church needs the word of God for its sanctification and growth (Eph. 5:25-27). The church is built up by the ministry of the word (Eph. 4:11-16). The chief gifts of the risen Christ to the church are ministers of the word (Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:28).

The Scripture testifies to its own sufficiency and authority: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17)." It testifies to its own finality: "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them (Isa. 8:20)." It testifies also to its own trustworthiness and completeness (2 Pet. 1:19-21; Rev. 22:18-19).

Heaven and earth will pass away, but God's word will remain forever (Mt. 24:35; 1 Pet. 1:23).

5.1.2 The primacy of preaching

If the word of God has the primacy, it is a proclaimed word. Reformed theology has always recognised this truth. The primacy of preaching needs to be re-asserted in view of the tendency today to depreciate it at the expense of other forms of activity.[4]

The primary task of the church is to proclaim the word of God. The church is "the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15)." It must not be diverted to social work, although social concerns have a legitimate place in its life. What perishing souls need most is the hearing of God's word expounded. The primary task of the minister is also the proclamation of the word (Acts 6:4; 2 Tim. 4:1-5). He prays, but his prayer life is carried out in conjunction with the task of preaching. Preaching, fuelled by prayer, is the God-appointed means to save souls and to build up the church (2 Cor. 2:14-16; Eph. 4:11-16; 2 Tim. 4:2; Isa. 55:11).

[4]D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, Chaps. 1 & 2.

5.1.3 Full-time preachers

The church is a commissioned community (Mt. 28:18-20). As such, every member has a responsibility to evangelise. Over and above this, however, official preachers are appointed by the risen Christ to be His ambassadors. They are the ministers of the gospel.

The word "minister" in Greek (*diakonos*) actually means one who serves. Used in the technical sense, it refers either to the office of "deacon" (1 Tim. 3:8, 12; Phil. 1:1) or to the office of "minister" (1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6; 6:4; 11:23; Eph. 3:7; Col. 1:23, 25; I Thess. 3:2; 1Tim. 4:6). A related word is "steward" (Greek, *oikonomos*). As with the word "minister", the technical sense of the word is often clear from such phrases as "stewards of the mysteries of God" or "steward of God" (1 Cor. 4:1; Tit. 1:7).

Ephesians 4:11 shows us that the ministers of the gospel included apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers. Since the extraordinary offices of apostle, prophet and evangelist have ceased, only that of the pastor-teacher remains. The pastor is a minister, who preaches and teaches God's word.

The preacher and the act of preaching are inseparable. This is a common-sense truth which needs no proving. It is, nevertheless, underlined for us explicitly in numerous passages of Scripture. Take Romans 10:13-15 as an example. It says, "For 'whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.' How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?"

Similarly, it says in 2 Corinthians 2:14-15, "Now thanks be to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ, and through us diffuses the fragrance of His knowledge in every place. For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing." In verse 14, the preached word is "the fragrance". In the verse after, the preachers are "the fragrance". Clearly, the preacher may not be separated from the act of preaching, and preaching from the word of God.

One final passage will suffice to prove the point. In I Timothy 5:17, we read: "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in the word and doctrine." This verse, and a number of other related passages, will be

considered in some detail in the next chapter (Chapter 6, The Validity of Ruling Elders). For the moment, we note that it is the *elders* who are to be given abundant honour, and not the abstract *functions* that they perform, as some people assert. Furthermore, the elders who "labour in the word and doctrine" are singled out as those who particularly deserve to be honoured. The preacher and the act of preaching are clearly inseparable.

Who are those elders who "labour in the word and doctrine"? The subsequent verse shows that they are the full-time ministers of the word: 'For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain," and, "The labourer is worthy of his wages."' That gospel preachers are to be supported financially by the church is clearly taught in 1 Corinthians 9:1-15. Verse 14 of that passage says, "Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel." The elders who "labour in the word and doctrine" must also be equated with the pastor-teachers of Ephesians 4:11, "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers."

5.1.4 The doctrine of "the call"

In Ephesians 4:11, the word "some" (Greek, *tous de*) does not come before "teachers", showing that "pastors and teachers" constitute one office. William Hendriksen pointed out that, in itself, this non-repetition of the word "some" might not be sufficient to prove that one group is meant.[5] However, in the present case we have the parallel in 1 Timothy 5:17, where mention is made of men who, in addition to exercising supervision over the flock together with the other elders, also "labour in the word and doctrine". John Gill said that the word "and" is exegetical, explaining what is meant by pastors, namely those who are teachers.[6] The "pastors and teachers" are therefore teaching elders.

The context of the passage also shows that only teaching elders are referred to here. Paul mentions the "pastors and teachers" together with apostles, prophets and evangelists. What is common to all four categories of officers? It is the fact that they all preach the word of God. The subsequent verses confirm this. Apostles,

[5] W. Hendriksen, *Ephesians*, p. 197.
[6] J. Gill, Vol. 2, p. 575.

prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers were given by the ascended Christ "for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to *the unity of the faith* and the *knowledge* of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, *tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine*, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness by which they lie in wait to deceive, but *speaking the truth* in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the Head... (verses 12-15)." (Italics added for emphasis.)

The preacher is inseparably linked to preaching, and preaching to the word of God. As with other ministers of the word, namely apostles, prophets and evangelists, the pastor needs the divine call of God to be in the ministry. He needs to be personally commissioned by Jesus Christ to be His ambassador, to proclaim the gospel to the fallen world. He stands in the tradition of the prophets of the Old Testament who were called to proclaim God's word. There is this inner compulsion in them which not only convinced them of their divine calling, but compelled them to proclaim the word. Jeremiah had to say that God's word "was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, and I could not (Jer. 20:9)." The apostle Paul had to say, "Necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel (1 Cor 9:16)!"

This inward constraint to preach must not be confused with a carnal desire for vain glory, or a mistaken estimate of one's gifts and calling. A fuller treatment of how the call to the ministry is to be recognised will be given in a subsequent chapter (see Chapter 8, Popular Election). At this juncture, we wish only to point out that this is a compulsion borne of divine activity within the individual. If anything, the one called is often reluctant, and even diffident, to be God's spokesman. Moses's response to the call of God is a case in point (Ex. 3:11, 13; 4:1, 10, 13). Despite all his protest, Moses finally submitted to God's will to be His ambassador. Similarly, Jeremiah remonstrated over his call, but had to willingly submit (Jer. 1:6). It is not improbable that 1 Timothy 3:1 was written with the intent of exhorting a diffident man who has been called to the ministry: "This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work." The 1 Peter 5:2 passage should probably be seen in the same light: "Shepherd the flock of God which

is among you, serving as overseers, *not by compulsion but willingly*, not for dishonest gain, but eagerly." (Emphasis added.)

Thus, there is in the minister of the gospel these two qualities of *authority* (or *dignity*) and *humility* that are married together – as a preacher, he is to proclaim the word with authority; as an overseer in the church, he is to rule with a "servant spirit", being examples to the flock (Mk. 10:42-45; Jn. 13:12-17; 1 Pet. 5:3). These are not contrary, but complementary, qualities. It would be wrong to emphasise one quality at the expense of the other. A minister is a servant *of* Christ *to* His church. As a minister of the gospel, he must proclaim the truth boldly and with authority. As a servant to the church, he must serve humbly and faithfully. He is not a servant *of* the church, to be used and abused according to the whims and fancies of the people. No. As a servant of Christ, he preaches without fear or favour, yet with compassion and love (1 Thess. 2:4-8; 1 Cor. 4:1-4, 2 Cor. 4:1-5; 5:9-11).

5.1.5 The concept of "office"

What we have established up to this point is that the principle of "the priority of the ministry" arises from the primacy of the word, from the primacy of preaching, and from the call to the ministry. It is also coupled to the concept of "office" (see the previous chapter, Rule By Elders). How many offices are there in the church? There are two basic offices – that of elder and that of deacon. Elders rule the church, and deacons serve in the temporal affairs of the church. It is not wrong, however, 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.

Within the one office of elder, therefore, we find certain elders who also occupy the office of pastor or minister. This would be the significance of the 1 Timothy 5:17 passage: "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in the word and doctrine." There are two sorts of elders – those who rule and teach (often called "teaching elders" for convenience), and those who only rule (called "ruling elders" for convenience). We need not engage ourselves in logomachy (that is, dispute about words), arguing whether there is "one *order* of presbyters embracing two *classes*", or "one *class* of presbyters embracing two *or-*

ders", as had happened in Presbyterian circles.[7] Our concern is only to note the truth that the teaching elder occupies the office of eider as well as the office of pastor or minister. There are, nevertheless, two basic offices in the church, not three completely different ones – that of elders, and that of deacons. John Owen stated this truth as follows:

> "The distinction between the elders themselves is not like that between elders and deacons, which is as unto the whole kind or nature of the office, but only with respect unto work and order, whereof we shall treat distinctly."[8]

Is not this confusing? No, unless one cannot accept anything until it is reduced to neat categories! The doctrine of the Trinity is confusing and unacceptable only when we wish to push human logic beyond its warranted use in the study of theology – one God consisting of three persons; each person fully God and yet there is but one God. Consider the person of Jesus Christ, as taught in the 1689 Confession of Faith, Chapter 8. He is the mediator between God and man, and He is also the prophet, priest and king of the church (paragraph 1). The *office* of mediator encompasses the *offices* of prophet, priest, and king (paragraphs 4, 9, & 10).

Thus, the Christian ministry has the priority not only because of the primacy of the word, the primacy of preaching, and the necessity of the call to the ministry, but also because it encompasses the two offices of elder and minister of the word. As an elder, the pastor rules with the other elders. As a minister of the word, he alone preaches regularly in the church.

5.1.6 Leadership in the church

Scripture teaches that there should be clear leadership among God's people – not leadership of the worldly kind, as has been pointed out already, but leadership that is characterised by the "servant spirit" of Mark 10:42-45. The incident recorded in Numbers 12 is a case in point. Miriam and Aaron challenged the leadership of Moses, and was punished by God. Moses emerged clearly as the God-appointed

[7] R. L. Dabney, Vol. 2, p. 133.
[8] JO, Vol 16, p. 42.

leader among the elders who ruled Israel. Similarly, among the apostles, Peter stood out as the leader. Among the elders in the Jerusalem church, James stood out as the leading elder (Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 1:19; 2:9). This James was not the apostle, the brother of John, who was killed by Herod (Acts 12:2). He was obviously a teaching elder, since he expounded the Scripture, in Acts 15:13-21, and was mentioned with Peter and John in Galatians 2:9, who were themselves teaching elders.

In the missionary team sent out from the church of Antioch, Paul was clearly the leader. When a delegation was sent to deliver the gift from the Macedonian churches to Judea, Titus, the preacher, acted as the leader (2 Cor. 8:23). Passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:28-30; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 5:17; Revelation 1:20 and 2:1 not only teach the priority of the ministry, but also that preachers should be the leaders in the church of God.

The book of Revelation is of particular interest to us because it is the last book of the Bible. It, therefore, speaks with a certain finality. Revelation 1:20 tells us that the seven stars in the hand of the Lord Jesus Christ are the angels of the seven churches. These "angels" have been variously interpreted as heavenly messengers, ministers or messengers of the churches, or personifications of the prevailing spirit of each church.[9] We would reject the first and third views, and agree instead with William Hendriksen who said that "the seven stars indicate the ministers of the churches, Christ's ambassadors".[10] This is because actual churches are referred to, and John is asked to write literal letters to them. Moreover, the things commended, or admonished, of each church are those that pertain to the Christian life. It is more natural to take the "angels" as referring to actual ministers, instead of "heavenly messengers" or "personifications of the prevailing spirit of each church". In the New Testament, the same word is used in reference to spirit beings (e.g. Heb. 1:4, 5) as well as to human messengers (Mt. 11:10; Lk. 7:27; 9:52; James 2:25).

It the angels are ministers of the churches, what has happened to ruling elders? Is there none in each church? In answer to these questions, we must remember that the book of Revelation is a prophetic

[9] *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, 1984.
[10] W. Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors*, p. 77.

book. Truths are couched in visions and symbols. The churches, letters, and ministers, although to be literally understood, actually occurred in a vision. A vision is intended to convey across to us some main truths, and no more. It must not be pressed beyond its intended purpose so as to yield a point-for-point analogy with reality. Seven is the number that symbolises perfection, or completeness. The seven churches represent all the churches of Christ throughout the world in the whole period up to Christ's return. The principle of representation is to be noted. Similarly, the minister is to be taken as the representative of all the elders of the church. The clear teaching of the rest of the New Testament shows that each church should ideally have a plurality of elders, consisting of a minister (or more than one of them) and ruling elders. The minister is, therefore, the leading elder. The stars in the right hand of Christ are the ministers of the gospel. Ministers enjoy the special protection of Christ, who specially commissions them to be His messengers. The priority of the ministry is underlined in Revelation 1 to 3.

This truth is consistent with the primacy of the word, and of preaching. It also highlights the importance of not only the number, but also the order, of the offices of Christ (see Chapter 3, The Headship Of Christ). It is the pastor of the church who most fully represents Christ, the Chief Shepherd, and the Shepherd and Overseer of souls (1 Pet. 5:4; 2:25). The perverse teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that the pope is the representative of Christ on earth should not cause us to react by rejecting all and every idea of "representation". There is a true sense in which the pastor of the church is a representative of Christ, fulfilling the offices of prophet, priest, and king. As a prophet, he expounds the word and thus reveals the will of God to the church. As a priest, he prays for the people of God. As a king, he rules over the church. The prophetic role is first, followed by the priestly, and then the kingly roles (Acts 6:4; 1 Tim. 5:17). The minister fulfils all three roles, while the ruling elder only fulfils the role of kingship. (This is not to say that the ruling elder has no share in the responsibilities of preaching and prayer. See Chapter 7, The Unity of the Eldership.) The preacher should, therefore, be the one who leads the eldership.

The word "priority" includes the idea of "primacy" and more. The element of comparison is introduced when we speak of "the priority of the ministry". The ministry of the word of God should have the

primacy (i.e. supreme place, pre-eminence) in the life of the church. It should also have the priority (i.e. being earlier, occupying a position of greater importance) over other important matters. We are here comparing the relative importance of the officers in the church. Of the two types of officers, namely elders and deacons, elders have the priority over deacons. The proofs of this truth are the same as those that show the subordination of the deacon's office to that of the elder's (see previous chapter, Rule By Elders). Of the two types of elders, the teaching elder has the priority over the ruling elders.

5.1.7 Implications

There are practical implications to the principle of the priority of the ministry. We mention two only here. First, a church should seek to appoint a teaching elder, or pastor, before a ruling elder. It should support a pastor before other full-time workers. A ruling elder only rules, while a pastor both teaches and rules. This is not to say that a ruling elder, or for that matter, other men in the church, may not preach. Neither does it mean that ruling elders, or for that matter, a church clerk (or "secretary"), may not be supported financially. All we are saying is that priority should be given to the appointment of a pastor.

Secondly, 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. Many problems will arise when a ruling elder leads the eldership, instead of the pastor. The pastor is the one who is specially gifted and trained for the ministry. Appointed full-time, he spends more time in prayer and the study of God's word. He has a better grasp of the overall situation of the church, and its relation to other churches, as well as to the world at large. If the pastor is not the leading elder, his liberty to preach, to plan, and to lead the church will be hampered.

5.2 "Priority" In Independency

5.2.1 The 1689 Confession

The position of the 1689 Confession of Faith on this matter is crystal-clear. We have noted time and again that Chapter 26 of the Confession, entitled "Of The Church", was based largely on the Savoy Platform of Church Polity of the paedobaptist Independents. However, there is one clause in the 1689 Confession that is not found in the Savoy Platform, nor in the Westminster Confession of Faith, the other confession of faith that the 1689 Confession relied upon. This is paragraph 10, which states:

> "The work of the pastors being constantly to attend the service of Christ, in His churches, in the ministry of the word and prayer, with watching for their souls, as they that must give an account to Him; it is incumbent on the churches to whom they minister, not only to give them all due respect, but also to communicate to them of all their good things, according to their ability, so as they may have a comfortable supply, without being themselves entangled in secular affairs; and may also be capable of exercising hospitality towards others; and this is required by the law of nature, and by the express order of our Lord Jesus, who hath ordained that they that preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel."

The deliberate inclusion of this paragraph in the Confession was intended to affirm and protect the priority of the ministry. This is in keeping with the earlier confession of the Particular Baptists, the First London Confession of Faith of 1644, Articles 37 and 38, which state:

> "That the ministers lawfully called, as aforesaid, ought to continue in their calling and place according to God's ordinance, and carefully to feed the flock of God committed to them, not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind."
>
> "The ministers of Christ ought to have whatsoever they shall need, supplied freely by the church, that according

> to Christ's ordinance they that preach the Gospel should live of the gospel by the law of Christ."

Significantly, there is another clause (namely, Article 44) in the 1644 Confession describing the office of those who could be *none other than the ruling elders*:

> "Christ for the keeping of this church in holy and orderly communion, placeth some special men over the church; who by their office, are to govern, oversee, visit, watch; so likewise for the better keeping thereof, in all places by the members, He hath given authority, and laid duty upon all to watch over one another."

Who are the "ministers" mentioned in Chapter 26 of the 1689 Confession? They are referred to again in Chapter 28, paragraph 2, and Chapter 30, paragraph 3, as those who are given the authority to administer the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. These "ministers" must be equated with the "pastors or teachers" of Article 34 of the Separatist Confession of 1596, upon which the 1644 Confession relied. That article states:

> "That such as God has given gifts to interpret the Scriptures, tried in the exercise of prophecy, giving attendance to study and learning, may and ought by the appointment of the congregation, to teach publicly the word, until the people be meet for, and God manifest men with able gifts and fitness to such office or offices as Christ has appointed to the public ministry of His church; *but no sacraments to be administered until the Pastors or Teachers be chosen and ordained into their office*."[11] (Italics added.)

We may summarise the use of the terms "pastors" and "ministers" in the three related confessions of faith as follows:

[11] W. L. Lumpkin, pp. 92-93.

Confession	Place	Word	Function
1689	Ch. 26:10 Ch. 30:3 cf. 28:2	pastors ministers	preach full-time administer ordinances
1644	Art. 37 & 38	ministers	preach full-time
1596	Art. 34	pastors	administer ordinances

We conclude from this comparison that the 1689 Confession uses the terms "pastors" and "ministers" interchangeably. As with the paedobaptist Independents, the Particular Baptists not only recognised a distinction between teaching elders and ruling elders, but also the priority of the teaching elders over the ruling elders.

5.2.2 John Owen

We consider, next, the view of John Owen, the doyen of Independency. Owen did not explicitly teach the principle of the priority of the ministry because there was no reason for him to do so. This principle was already in recognition and it needed no defence. In spite of this, we are able to see clearly from various statements that Owen did indeed believe in the priority of the ministry. These we shall glean from his definitive work on church government, namely "The True Nature of a Gospel Church and its Government".

We have noted above, as well as in the previous chapter (Chapter 4, Rule By Elders), that Owen not only believed that there are two sorts of elders but also that the "pastors" are a reference to the elders who teach and administer the ordinances:

> "The officers of the church in general are of two sorts, 'bishops and deacons' (Phil. 1:1); and their work is distributed into 'prophecy and ministry' (Rom. 12:6, 7). The bishops or elders are of two sorts: (i) Such as have authority to teach and administer the sacraments,... and of ruling,... and (ii) Some have only power for rule,... Those of the first sort are distinguished into pastors and teachers."[12]

[12] JO, Vol. 16, p. 42.

That there is a distinction between the elders is one thing. That the teaching elders have the priority over the ruling elders is another. Below are some indications that Owen did believe in the priority of the ministry.

(i) The pastor is the principal teacher and overseer of the church. In his discussion of the officers of the church, Owen began with the pastors, followed by teachers, and then ruling elders, in that order. The following statements confirm this:

> "The first officer or elder of the church is the pastor. A pastor is the elder that feeds and rules the flock (1 Pet. 5:2); that is, who is its teacher and its bishop."[13]

> "The name of a *pastor* or *shepherd* is metaphorical. It is a denomination suited unto his work, denoting the same office and person with the bishop or elder, spoken absolutely, without limitation unto either teaching or ruling; and it seems to be used or applied unto this office because it is more comprehensive of and instructive in all the duties that belong unto it than any other name whatever, nay, than all of them put together"[13]

> "But this name is by the Holy Ghost appropriated unto the principal ministers of Christ in His church (Eph. 4:11); and under that name they were promised unto the church of old (Jer. 3:15)."[14]

> "The principle care of the rule of the church is incumbent on the pastors of it. This is the second general head of the power and duty of this office, whereunto many things in particular belong."[15]

(ii) There must be clear leadership in the church. In the normal situation of a church having one pastor who is assisted by many elders, the pastor is to be the leading elder. If there are more than one pastors, perhaps assisted by other elders, one of the pastors should be recognised as the leading elder in the church.

[13] JO, Vol. 16, p. 47.
[14] JO, Vol. 16, p. 48.
[15] JO, Vol. 16, p. 88.

> "I do acknowledge, that where a church is greatly increased, so as that there is a necessity of many elders in it for its instruction and rule, decency and order do require that one of them do, in the management of all church-affairs, preside, to guide and direct the way and manner thereof..."[16]
>
> "Wherefore let the state of the church be preserved and kept unto its original constitution, which is congregational,[17] and no other, and I do judge that the order of the officers which was so early in the primitive church, – namely, of one pastor or bishop in one church, assisted in rule and all holy administrations with many elders teaching or ruling only, – doth not so overthrow church-order as to render its rule or discipline useless."[18]
>
> "But whereas there is no difference in the Scripture, as unto office or power, intimated between bishops and presbyters, as we have proved, when there are many teaching elders in any church, an equality in office and power is to be preserved. But yet this takes not off from the due preference of the pastoral office, nor from the necessity of precedence for the observation of order in all church assemblies, nor from the consideration of the particular advantages which gifts, age, abilities, prudence, and experience, which may belong unto some, according to rule, may give."[19]

(iii) The office of the pastor encompasses more responsibilities than that of the ruling elder. The pastor not only rules, but also preaches and administers the ordinances. He also has concerns beyond the local church – preaching the gospel elsewhere, and promoting inter-church fellowship.

> "The administration of the seals of the covenant is committed unto them, as the stewards of the house of Christ; for unto them the authoritative dispensation of the word

[16] JO, Vol. 16, p. 46.
[17] Meaning "Independent". See *Introduction* of this book.
[18] JO, Vol. 16, p. 105.
[19] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 105-106.

> is committed, whereunto the administration of the seals is annexed; for their principal end is the peculiar confirmation and application of the word preached.”[20]
>
> “When, therefore, there are great opportunities and providential calls for the preaching of the gospel unto the conversion of souls, and, the harvest being great, there are not labourers sufficient for it, it is lawful, yea, it is the duty of pastors of particular churches to leave their constant attendance on their pastoral charge in those churches, at least for a season, to apply themselves unto the more public preaching of the word unto the conversion of the souls of men.”[21]
>
> “There is a communion to be observed among all the churches of the same faith and profession in any nation. ...The principal care hereof, unto the edification of the churches, is incumbent on the pastors of them.”[15]

(iv) Ruling elders, although occupying the same office of bishop or overseer, play the role of supporters to the pastors.

> “It doth not hence follow that those who are called unto the ministry of the word, as pastors and teachers, who are elders also, are divested of the right to rule in the church, or discharged from the exercise of it, because others not called unto their office are appointed to be assistant unto them, that is “helps in the government”; for the right and duty of rule is inseparable from the office of elders, which all bishops or pastors are.”[22] (The “helps in the government” is a reference to ruling elders, as Owen made clear subsequently in his explanation of Romans 12:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:28-30.[23])
>
> “It is their duty, according to the advantage which they have, by their peculiar inspection of all the members of the church, their ways and their walking, *to acquaint the pastors*, or teaching elders of the church, *with the state*

[15] JO, Vol. 16, p. 88.
[20] JO, Vol. 16, p. 79.
[21] JO, Vol. 16, p. 85.

> *of the flock*; which may be of singular use unto them for their direction in the present work of the ministry."[24] (italics original.)
>
> "And it is their duty to *meet and consult with the teaching elders* about such things of importance as are to be proposed in and unto the church, for its consent and compliance."[24] (Italics original.)

(v) The pastor is to be supported financially to minister the word full-time. It is not wrong to support a ruling elder financially,[25] but priority is to be given to the pastor.

> "A man is a pastor unto them whom he feeds by pastoral teaching, and no more; and he that doth not so feed is no pastor. Nor is it required only that he preached now and then at his leisure, but that he lay aside all other employments, though lawful, all other duties in the church, as unto such constant attendance on them as would divert him from this work, that he give himself unto it, – that he be in these things labouring to the utmost of his ability. Without this no man will be able to give a comfortable account of the pastoral office at the last day."[26]

5.3 Denials Of "Priority"

We return to the articles by Iain Murray on the ministry and the eldership. Murray made the following observation:

> "Many churches – notably Presbyterian ones – have maintained an eldership and others have introduced it in Calvinistic churches of other traditions. The questions are asked: 'Have ministers any more spiritual authority to preach and to lead public worship than the elders? Are not all elders required to be 'apt to teach' (1 Tim. 3:2) and to 'feed

[22] JO, Vol 16, p. 111.
[23] JO, Vol 16, pp. 123-129.
[24] JO, Vol 16, p. 141.
[25] JO, Vol 16, pp. 122-123.
[26] JO, Vol 16, p. 75.

> the church of God' (Acts 20:28)? Why, then, it is concluded, should work which in the apostolic era belonged to all elders now be restricted to ministers alone? The cry against 'one-man ministry' is thus also being heard in Calvinistic circles and, in measure, there is a coalescence of ideas with the popular movement (to abolish the Christian ministry) outlined above. Even in Reformed ranks, therefore, defence of the ministerial office appears to be hesitant and muted. We appear to be unwilling to take up the challenge."[27]

There are certain Calvinistic Baptists on the fringes of the current Reformed Baptist movement who have come from a background of dispensational Arminianism, but who remain basically Congregationalists. They have advocated strongly the idea of "the equality of all elders" and denied altogether the concept of "office". They stress instead the idea of every Christian exercising a ministry, and deny the notion of *the ministry* of the word. They would even advocate the centrality of the Lord's Supper, instead of the proclamation of God's word, in the worship service![28] All these have been characteristics of Brethrenism since the nineteenth century. There is nothing new under the sun! Teachings like these would directly undermine the Christian ministry as it is traditionally understood. Reformed Baptists are generally not enamoured by these other Baptists. The only thing that is common between them is their Calvinistic soteriology.

5.3.1 "Absolute Equality" in America

It is a matter of great regret that some prominent Reformed Baptists are numbered among those who are helping towards the abolition of the Christian ministry, either wittingly or unwittingly, by their strong advocation of "absolute equality" in which all elders are regarded as pastors. These Reformed Baptists have had an influence that is out of proportion to their small numbers. This is due largely to the dissemination of their theory of eldership at conferences and through the circulation of cassette tapes.[29] We have seen that the position

[27] I, Murray, BT 237, p. 10.

[28] J. Zens, pp. 8-21. (Zens has apparently become a Plymouth Brethren.).

of all Independents – Particular Baptists included – had been that all pastors are elders, but not all elders are pastors. The view of these present-day Reformed Baptists is, therefore, not that of the early Independents.

In his excellent commentary on the 1689 Confession of Faith, Samuel Waldron holds to the view that no distinction should be made between the pastors and ruling elders.[30] He thus finds a certain ambiguity in the terms used to describe the officers of the church. In the Confession, the terms "bishop" and "elder" are used to refer to the same office in paragraphs 8 and 9 of Chapter 26. In paragraph 10, only pastors are mentioned as those who are to be supported financially. In paragraph 11, the pastors are equated with the bishops. Waldron's proposed solution to the ambiguity is tenuous and unconvincing, simply because he has made the prior assumption that pastors and elders are to be absolutely equated.

If, instead, we hold to the view of the early Independents, exemplified in John Owen, no ambiguity would arise. It is to be noted that paragraphs 1 to 4 of the Confession are substantially derived from the Westminster Confession, while paragraphs 5 to 15 are derived substantially from the platform of church polity published with the Savoy Declaration of Faith. Since Owen was the one who was mainly responsible for the drafting of the Savoy Declaration,[31] it should not surprise us that the structure of the section on the local church found in the 1689 Confession follows closely the structure of his book, "The True Nature of a Gospel Church and Its Government". An analysis of Chapter 26 of the Confession is as follows:

Paragraphs 1-4: The Universal Church

Paragraphs 5-15: The Local Church

5-7: Its Nature and Constitution

8-11: Its Government

12-13: Its Discipline

[29] A. N. Martin's tapes on this subject, MI-M-64 to 66, have been circulated widely by those who adhere to the *absolute equality* view of the eldership.

[30] S. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition*, pp.340-343.

[31] J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, p. 193.

14-15: Inter-church Fellowship

Paragraphs 8 and 9 are general clauses pertaining to teaching and ruling elders. These officers of the church are referred to as "bishops or elders". It should be noted that these terms are not equated with "pastors" because not all elders are pastors, while all pastors are elders.

Paragraph 10 contains specific statements pertaining to teaching elders, who are called "pastors". Their work is "the ministry of the word and prayer", and they are to be financially supported by the church since the Lord has "ordained that they that preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel".

Paragraph 11 equates pastors with bishops because they *are* bishops. The paragraph in full reads as follows:

> "Although it be incumbent on the bishops or pastors of the churches, to be instant in preaching the word, by way of office, yet the work of preaching the word is not so peculiarly confined to them but that others also gifted and fitted by the Holy Spirit for it, and approved and called by the church, may and ought to perform it."

This statement was necessary because the early Independents, together with the Presbyterians, had to fight the battle on two fronts – against the clericalism of Episcopacy on the one hand, and against the anarchy of extreme Congregationalism on the other. The first half of the statement was meant to counter the clericalism of Episcopacy, while the second half was meant to counter the anarchy of extreme Congregationalism. The first half affirms that pastors ("pastors and teachers", in the Savoy Platform) preach "by way of office", while the second halt allows gifted individuals to preach provided that they are "approved and called by the church".

That we have correctly understood the intent and emphases of that statement may be seen from the following considerations. John Owen had in 1643, when still a Presbyterian, written on precisely this matter – namely, of the relative responsibilities of ministers and uncalled Christians in the work of preaching. In the preface to that book, "The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished", he wrote:

> "In the matter concerning which I propose my weak essay, some would have all Christians to be almost minis-

> ters; others, none but ministers to be God's clergy. Those would give the people the keys, these use them to lock them out of the church; the one ascribing to them primarily all ecclesiastical power for the ruling of the congregation, the other abridging them of the performance of spiritual duties for the building of their own souls; as though there were no habitable earth between the valley (I had almost said the pit) of democratical confusion and the precipitous rock of hierarchical tyranny."[32]

He was to write later that his views in that earlier book had not changed, although on hindsight they would have been more appropriately placed under the Independent system than Presbyterianism.[33] In that work, Owen stressed the necessity of the call to the ministry of God's word, and castigated uncalled Christians who preached as they liked, without due regard to order. He, however, approved of gifted Christians preaching the word with the due recognition of the church. These are exactly the sentiments expressed in Chapter 26, paragraph 11, of the 1689 Confession.

The Particular Baptists changed the terms "pastors and teachers" to "bishops or pastors" to further emphasise that pastors are indeed biblical bishops, over against the Episcopalian idea of "bishops" who are not pastors of local congregations. Moreover, to them (the Particular Baptists), there is no difference between the pastors and the teachers in that these are but different names for the teaching elders. Once this is understood, the apparent ambiguity seen by Waldron is removed. John Owen himself constantly spoke of the pastor as the bishop, as though ruling elders are not bishops. For example, he said:

> "The first officer or elder of the church is the pastor. A pastor is the elder that feeds and rules the flock (1 Pet. 5:2); that is, who is its teacher and its bishop."[13]
>
> "Wherefore he who is the pastor is the bishop, the elder, the teacher of the church."[14]
>
> "Wherefore let the state of the church be preserved and kept unto its original constitution, which is congrega-

[32] JO, Vol. 13, p. 5.
[33] JO, Vol 13, pp. 222-223.

> tional and no other, and I do judge that the order of the officers which was so early in the primitive church, – namely, of one pastor or bishop in one church, assisted in rule and all holy administrations with many elders teaching or ruling only, – doth not so overthrow church-order as to render its rule or discipline useless."[18]
>
> "...for the right and duty of rule is inseparable from the office of elders, which all bishops or pastors are."[22]

From these quotes alone we might draw the wrong conclusions that: (i) Owen did not believe that ruling elders are bishops, since the pastors are the ones called "bishops", or (ii) he believed that all elders, whether "teaching elders" or "ruling elders", are pastors. We know better, however, for Owen had made it clear from the outset that:

> "The officers of the church in general are of two sorts, 'bishops and deacons' (Phil. 1:1); and their work is distributed into 'prophecy and ministry' (Rom. 12:6, 7). The bishops or elders are of two sorts: (i) Such as have authority to teach and administer the sacraments, ...and of ruling, ...and (ii) Some have only power for rule, ...Those of the first sort are distinguished into pastors and teachers."[12]

Once we are clear that all pastors are elders or bishops, while not all elders or bishops are pastors, Chapter 28, paragraph 2, and Chapter 30, paragraph 3, of the 1689 Confession become easy to understand. Chapter 28, paragraph 2, refers to pastors whose duty it is to administer the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Since the two ordinances are visible symbols of the covenant, and they uniquely confirm and apply the preached word, it is the prerogative of the preacher to administer them.[20] The proof texts used in the original Confession were Matthew 28:19 and 1 Corinthians 4:1, both of which refer to the preachers of God's word. Samuel

[13] JO, Vol 16, p. 47.
[14] JO, Vol 16, p. 48.
[18] JO, Vol 16, p. 105.
[22] JO, Vol 16, p. 111.
[12] JO, Vol 16, p. 42.

Waldron had to engage in some intricate theological gymnastics to arrive at the conclusion that these proof texts refer to all the elders of the church.[34] Chapter 30, paragraph 3, uses the word "minister" in the traditional sense that he is the pastor or teaching elder. He it is who should pray and bless the elements when conducting the Lord's Supper.

This does not mean that the task of praying and giving thanks for the elements cannot be delegated to others. As with baptism, the actual administration of it may be delegated to other men in the church, but the authority and responsibility remains with the minister. (Compare with John 4:1-2.)

5.3.2 "Absolute Equality" in United Kingdom

A similar view of *equality* has been propagated on the other side of the Atlantic. This view is represented in the book entitled "Only Servants", by Clifford Pond, which was published in the United Kingdom in 1991. Pond advocates the parity of elders from a different angle. He takes the equality, or parity (his preference of the word), of elders a stage further and denies the concept of office altogether, saying:

> "There is no such thing in the New Testament as a special 'ministry' or 'office' – the emphasis is on the use of gifts the ascended Lord has given to his church."[35]

We find at least three misleading quotes in Pond's book. To support the idea that there is no "office" in the New Testament, he partially quoted W. E. Vine, in reference to 1 Timothy 3:1, that, "the word 'office' has nothing to represent it in the original."[36] As we have shown in the previous chapter (Chapter 4, Rule By Elders), this was only a partial quote from Vine. Vine went on to say, "the phrase literally is 'overseership'." In other words, while *episkopê* in Greek should not be translated "office" in English, the notion of office is taught. The New King James version of the Bible translates the word by the phrase, "the position of a bishop".

[20] JO, Vol 16, p. 79.
[34] S. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition*, pp. 340-343.
[35] C. Pond, p. 53.
[36] C. Pond, p. 43.

The second misleading quote is taken from John Owen:

> "These works of teaching and ruling may be distinct in several officers, namely, teachers and rulers; but to divide them in the same office of pastors, that some should feed by teaching only but have no right to rule by virtue of their office, and some should attend in exercise unto rule only, not esteeming themselves obliged to labour continually in feeding the flock, is almost to overthrow the office of Christ's designation, and to set up two in the room of it, of men's own projection."[37]

To use this passage to support his idea of *parity* is to completely misrepresent Owen. Owen was discussing the office of *pastors*, and not the office of *ruling elders*, nor that of *elders* in general. He was saying that pastors must both teach and rule at the same time. The work of pastors must not be divided so that some pastors only teach while others of them only rule. The works of teaching and ruling are combined in the one office of pastor. Owen did not believe that all elders are pastors, as Pond seems to think he did. Rather, he believed that all pastors are elders.

The third misleading quote is taken from C. H. Spurgeon. Spurgeon is quoted at length to show that he believed in the plurality of elders. What is not pointed out, however, is the fact that Spurgeon not only believed in the plurality of elders, but he also believed in the priority of the ministry as well. In the passage quoted, Spurgeon said:

> "This is an order of Christian workers which appears to have dropped out of existence. In apostolic times, they had both deacons and elders, but, somehow, the church has departed from this early custom. We have one *preaching elder* – that is, *the Pastor* – and he is expected to perform all the duties of the eldership."[38] (Italics added.)

It is Pond's prerogative to quote this passage in support of the idea of the plurality of elders. But to be completely fair, the impression must not be given that Spurgeon believed also in *parity*. The

[37] C. Pond, p. 52, quoting from JO, Vol 16, p. 48.
[38] C. Pond, p. 34.

fact of the matter is that Spurgeon believed in *priority* instead of *parity*. Nine years after the incident quoted above, in which Spurgeon was able to persuade the church to appoint more elders to assist him, his own brother, James, was appointed as co-pastor.[39] James was not appointed to be a ruling elder, but a pastor. Clearly, C. H. Spurgeon believed in the distinction between the teaching elders and the ruling elders. Furthermore, he believed in the necessity of clear leadership in the eldership. Before James was appointed, it was made clear to him that his brother, Charles, was to be the leading pastor. All this while, there were about twenty-five elders in the church![40] C. H. Spurgeon believed in the priority of the ministry.

Those represented by Pond on the one hand, and Waldron on the other, seem to have arrived at the same basic conclusions from two different directions. Those of Pond's view seem to have come from the direction of being sympathetic to the emphasis on "sharing" and "open worship" of the charismatic movement and Brethrenism. Their denial of the concepts of "office" and "the ministry", together with their emphasis on the exercise of gifts by every Christian, would point to this. Those of Waldron's view seem to have come from the direction of adapting a form of Presbyterianism to a Baptist setting. Their retention of the concept of office,[41] together with their heavy reliance on Presbyterian authors, would point to this.[42] Back of these two streams of the *absolute equality* view of the eldership lies the fear of incipient clericalism.

There are many dangers posed by the *absolute equality* view of eldership, one of which is its effect of undermining the Christian ministry. The principle of "the priority of the ministry" is thus denied. All this occur at a time when the Christian world at large is hostile to any idea of authority, even of the right kind: for example, the lordship of Christ, the authority of Scripture, the primacy of preaching, the importance of clear leadership of the church by God-appointed ministers. We shall have occasion to deal with the other dangers posed by the *absolute equality* view of eldership, in the two chapters following. We only note at this juncture the truth of Iain

[39] C. H. Spurgeon, Vol. 2, p. 79.

[40] C. H. Spurgeon, Vol. 2, p. 75.

[41] S. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition*, p. 321.

[42] All the references under Chapter 26 of Waldron's commentary on the 1689 Confession are Presbyterian.

Murray's remark:

> "Certainly the primary share of the blame for the present situation must be taken by those of us who are in the ministry. We have failed to see the true glory of our calling and failed to believe with over-mastering conviction that Christ speaks through the word preached. The modern pulpit has attempted much in the way of exercising personality, education, even eloquence, but all to no purpose if the unction of a messenger from heaven is absent. When the priesthood of apostate Roman Catholicism confronted the ministry of the Reformers, the latter answered them in the spirit of Elijah's answer to the prophets of Baal. And as in Elijah's day so also it was in the 16th century: 'Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces: and they said, The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God! (1 Kings 18:39).' So it must be again."[43]

5.4 Summary

1 The principle of "the priority of the ministry" needs to be reasserted today because of the presence of tendencies to undermine it. The priority of the Christian ministry arises from the primacy of God's word, the primacy of preaching, the validity of full-time ministry, the necessity of the divine call to the ministry, the concept of "office", and the principle of leadership among God's people.

2 The ministry of the word should have the *primacy* (that is, the supreme place, the pre-eminence) in the life of the church. It should have the *priority* (that is, being earlier, occupying the position of greater importance) over other important matters. Of the two types of elders, the teaching elders have the priority over the ruling elders.

[43] I. Murray, BT 238, pp. 4-5.

3 The Particular Baptists affirmed and protected the priority of the ministry by incorporating a paragraph (namely, 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 word "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.

4 John Owen believed that there is a distinction between teaching elders and ruling elders. To him, the teaching elders are the pastors. All pastors are elders, but not all elders are pastors. The pastors have the priority over the ruling elders. The pastor (or one of them, if there are more than one pastor) should act as the leading elder.

5 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, for the different functions they perform. To them, all elders are pastors. 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.

Six

THE VALIDITY OF RULING ELDERS

The current unrest over the eldership issue in Reformed Baptist circles must be understood in the light of similar unrests that had occurred in the past among the Presbyterians.[1] All these earlier controversies revolved around the validity of the office of ruling elders in the church. There were two main occasions when the controversy raged. In the seventeenth century, the Westminster divines wrestled with the issue. Since it was left unresolved at that time, the issue surfaced again among the Presbyterians in the nineteenth century. While the disagreements became more clearly drawn this time, a new element was introduced to the whole issue by Witherow's attempt to reconcile the two opposing parties. The new element was the idea of "absolute equality", in which the distinction between teaching and ruling elders was erased. In a sense, therefore, the issue became more complicated. It began with two opposing views, but it ended with three different ones!

As will be shown below, the current fad to restore a plurality of elders, coupled with the emphasis on the equality of all elders, in Reformed Baptist churches, is in reality a struggle over the validity of the office of ruling elders. The controversy has, in part, been the result of introducing Presbyterian views into a Baptist situation. As long as the Presbyterians are allowed to set the pace in this matter,

[1]BT 235, pp. 1-9.

there will be no possibility of a clear resolution for Reformed Baptists. The answer to the current confusion, as will be shown below, lies in a return to the Independency of the early Particular Baptists.

6.1 The Presbyterian Controversies

We quote Iain Murray on the first occasion of the controversy: "The question which arises is how this Presbyterian distinction between 'ministers' and 'elders' is to be justified from the New Testament? Upon what grounds should such a title as 'pastor' be restricted to one if the word in the New Testament is descriptive of *all* elders? This was the question which the Westminster divines began to debate on November 22, 1643. By December 7, 1643, despite much discussion the matter was still unresolved and it was left to a committee to attempt to find agreement. This was subsequently done but in terms which still left an obscurity over the nature of the office which the elder occupies. The divines wrote:

> 'Christ ...hath furnished some in his church, beside the ministers of the word, with gifts for government, and with commission to execute the same when called thereunto, who are to join with the minister in the government of the church. Which officers reformed churches commonly called Elders.'

The proof texts given for the above statement are significant, namely, Romans 12:7-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:28. These texts, it should be noted, do not make reference to the office of the eldership. Deliberately the Westminster divines do not cite the eldership passages in Acts, 1 Timothy, or Titus, but only to texts which speak of gifts of ruling. The quotation is from a paragraph headed 'Other Church-Governors' and only in reference to the usage of Reformed churches are they willing to refer to these officers as 'Elders'. In other words, the Westminster divines, in their official documents, were not prepared to *identify* those who were then known as elders with those formally given that title in the New Testament.

Certainly there were some members of the Assembly who regretted what was obviously an accommodation of differences. These men, and notably the Scottish members, argued that ruling elders

occupied the same office as ministers, that they were equally presbyters, and differed only in their duties. Their argument had the support of Calvin's interpretation of 1 Timothy 5:17, 'Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine'. These words, it was claimed, suggest two sorts of work, both exercised by elders – in the case of some, ruling only, and in the case of others, the addition of diligence in teaching. Neither this nor similar arguments found any official endorsement on the part of the Westminster Assembly. For the present the debate terminated but it was far from closed."[2]

The second occasion of the controversy opened when Dr. Samuel Miller, Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government at Princeton Theological Seminary, published a new work on the Eldership. A revised and enlarged edition appeared in 1831, "The Warrant, Nature and Duties of the office of the Ruling Elders." Presbyterianism, traditionally, had seen elders and ministers as two distinct and separate classes. Ministers are specially equipped and called of God to preach, to administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and to rule. Elders are lay men, representatives of the congregation in the session and the higher church courts, and sharing the rule with the ministers. Along the way, there had been an undervaluing of the position and work of ruling elders. Miller's purpose was to revive a sense of the importance of the elder's work.

Following Miller, other Presbyterian leaders such as R. J. Breckinridge, J. H. Thornwell and R. L. Dabney pleaded for the recognition of one office, to which belong the ministers and ruling elders. Both classes of men are presbyters. The minister differs from the ruling elder only in the added function of preaching. William Cunningham of Edinburgh was inclined to this view, although along the way he confessed to having been shaken by the view of Charles Hodge. Charles Hodge and Thomas Smyth argued for the position stated in the official documents of the Westminster divines – namely, that "ruling elders" are strictly not the presbyters of the New Testament who hold office but rather they perform the ruling functions mentioned in Romans 12:7-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:28. Hodge and Smyth were joined by Dr. Peter Campbell of Scotland who published his view of the eldership in 1866.

[2]BT 235, pp. 1-2.

Thomas Witherow, a strong exponent of the Presbyterian polity in Britain, attempted to propose some lines of solution in 1873. He argued that elder and bishop, presbyter and pastor, are in the New Testament different names for the same office-bearer. He further claimed that as there was no distinction in the names given to all elders (bishops, presbyters) so there should be no distinction in their duties. He rejected the use of 1 Timothy 5:17 as a proof text that there are two classes of elders distinguished by their different work. This was a new twist added to the view of Thornwell, and others of his view, in that not only is there no difference in office, but there is now no difference in their functions. The duties of teaching and ruling are common to all elders. Any difference that may appear between the preacher and the other elders in practice is just the consequence of the circumstances. One elder receives special training, and thus becomes the regular preacher. Any of the other elders could have been chosen for training, to become preachers.

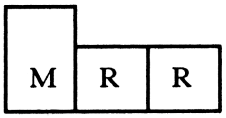
Iain Murray pointed out that all those who shared in the controversy were concerned with what they feared to be the injurous *consequences* of contrary views. Miller, Breckinridge, Thornwell and Dabney were concerned to raise the position of ruling elders to what they believed to be their rightful place as presbyters. Hodge, Smyth and Campbell were concerned to uphold the importance of the ministry of God's word. Witherow stood in the awkward position of raising the position of ruling elders but downgrading the importance of the ministry. As will be seen later, all three positions have their counterparts among Reformed Baptists today.

6.2 Assessment Of The Views On Eldership

An assessment of the three views are in order. It will help if we summarise the different views of eldership by the diagrams below. Each view is given a name, the propriety of which will become clear as we proceed. The following symbols are used: M for minister, R for ruling elders, and E for elders.

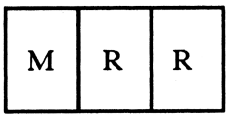
6.2.1 Presbyterian View

We shall call the first view the "Presbyterian View" because it was the official view of the Westminster Assembly as well as the conti-



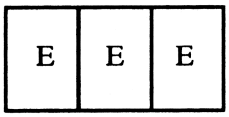
Presbyterian View:

C. Hodge, T. Smyth, P. Campbell, Westminster Assembly, J. Calvin, U. Zwingli.



Independent View:

S. Miller, J. H. Thornwell, R. L. Dabney, R. J. Breckinridge, W. Cunningham, J. Cotton, J. Owen, Particular Baptists.



Absolute Equality View:

T. Witherow, Plymouth Brethren, Campbellites.

nental reformers.[3] Calvin, in his commentary on various passages of the New Testament – including James 5:15, 1 Peter 5:1, 1 Timothy 5:17, and 1 Corinthians 5:4 – taught that ruling elders were included among the presbyters mentioned in those passages. In practice, however, he seemed to have followed the view stated in his *magnum opus* – the "Institutes of the Christian Religion" – in which ruling elders were regarded as a different class of officers, the warrant of which is to be found in Romans 12:8 and 1 Corinthians 12:28.[4] Thornwell had noted that there was a discrepancy between the belief and the practice of the Reformers.[5]

In the Presbyterian View, only ministers are presbyters of the New Testament sense. The ruling elders are laymen, representatives of the people in the session (or presbytery), to assist the ministers in the government of the church. They derive their power of jurisdiction from the congregation, and not directly from Christ. The minister holds an office distinct from, and above, that of the ruling elders. He has the pre-eminence not only in the office, but also in

[3] S. Miller, p. 40.
[4] J. Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk. 4, Ch. 3, para. 8.
[5] J. H. Thornwell, Vol. 4, p. 623.

the actual government of the church. This view continues to be held by many Presbyterian denominations today.

There are many weaknesses in this view, the first of which had been noted by Witherow: "The introduction into the church constitution of an official who can plead no warrant for his office from the Scripture, opens a wide door for the creation of other offices, as expediency may suggest or human wisdom determine."[6] This is tantamount to saying that Presbyterianism – notwithstanding its long claim of "divine right" (*jus divinum*) for its church polity – lacks scriptural authority for its largest group of office bearers. This is, indeed, a serious charge.

Charles Hodge had attempted to reply to this charge, saying that in broad terms the eldership is divinely warranted. He based this claim on the general biblical principle that rule in the church is shared in by the people, among whom the gift of governing and ruling is a permanent gift. The people share in the rule of the church through their elected representatives, the "ruling elders".[7] Thornwell had countered this argument, saying that this was a weak understanding of the "divine right" principle. "Divine right" may be claimed only when a practice is in accordance with positive prescriptions of Scripture, and not just in accordance to some broad, regulative, principles.[8]

The second weakness of the Westminster view is that it smacks too much of the clericalism of Prelacy. The minister is obviously looked upon as a clergyman, and the ruling elders as laymen. Charles Hodge, in supporting this view against that advocated by Thornwell, said:

> "In thus destroying the peculiarity of the office, its value is destroyed. It is precisely because the ruling elder is *a layman*, that he is a real power, a distinct element, in our system. The moment you dress him *in canonicals*, you destroy his power and render him ridiculous. It is because he is not *a clergyman*, it is because he is one of the people, engaged in the ordinary business of life,

[6] BT 235, p. 7.
[7] J. H. Thornwell, Vol. 4, p. 623.
[8] J. H. Thornwell, Vol. 4, pp. 218-219, 252-253.

> separated from *the professional class of ministers*, that he is what he is in our church-courts.[9] (Italics added.)

The third weakness of this view is that the preeminence given to the office of the minister makes it prone to autocracy – something seen in Prelacy, which Presbyterianism had studiously attempted to avoid, but without much success. John Murray, a Presbyterian who held to Thornwell's view of eldership, testified thus:

> "Ministers of the word in Presbyterian denominations are not immune to the vice of autocracy, and they are too ready to grasp at an authority that does not belong to them. This evil, which has marred the witness of churches professing presbyterian government, only illustrates the need for constant vigilance, lest the elementary principles of presbyterian government be violated and desecrated. It is not only by erroneous theory that presbytery is prejudiced, but also by practice which subtly annuls the theory professed."[10]

6.2.2 Independent View

We have called the second view of eldership the "Independent View" because it was the view of all the Independents – including John Cotton, John Owen, and the Particular Baptists. Some Presbyterians of the Westminster Assembly, including George Gillespie, were also of this persuasion.[11] As we have seen, the view of these Presbyterians was not accepted as the official position of the Assembly. It was left to the Independents, notably John Owen, to develop this view fully. This view was incorporated into the Cambridge Platform of the New England Independents, and is the undergirding basis of the Savoy Platform, as well as of the 1689 Confession of Faith.

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*,

[9] J. H. Thornwell, Vol. 4, p. 283.
[10] J. Murray, Vol. 2, p. 347.
[11] J. Bannerman, Vol. 2, p. 307 (footnote).

but not the same office *of teaching*. It is this apparent ambiguity in which the minister's office is superadded to the elder's office that seems to have been the main cause of the misunderstandings on both sides of the controversy. John Owen, however, had clarified this point. He said that "the distinction between the elders themselves is not like that between elders and deacons, which is as unto the whole kind of or nature of the office, but only with respect unto work and order."[12] Thornwell had similarly argued that there is but one *order* of spiritual rulers, which is distributed into two *classes*, namely teaching elders and ruling elders.[13]

In the previous chapter (Chapter 5, The Priority of the Ministry), we have shown that it is valid to speak of the office of pastor or minister, and the office of elder. And, for that matter, it is not wrong to speak of the *office* of teaching elder and the *office* of ruling elders! Not only is the work of teaching superadded to the work of ruling, in the teaching elder, but he actually occupies two offices! It is the recognition of this truth that has led some men to speak of "three kinds of officers", namely minister or pastor, ruling elders, and deacons.[14] A statement like this is, in itself, not wrong. However, it needs the balancing qualifications that: (i) As far as the *government* of the church is concerned, there is but one office of elders; and, (ii) The difference between the teaching elders and the ruling elders is only a matter of order (or priority) in the same office, compared to the difference between elders and deacons, which are totally different *kinds* of offices. These qualifications explain paragraphs 8, 9, and 10 of the 1689 Confession of Faith. In paragraphs 8 and 9, two offices only are mentioned as continuing in the church – those of elders and deacons. In paragraph 10, the office of pastor is given due recognition. Without these qualifications, one would be misunderstood to be upholding the traditional Presbyterian view.

From this discussion, it is clear that men like Miller, Thornwell and Dabney were, in fact, advocating the Independent view of the eldership. Thornwell, for one, was willing to quote John Owen favourably.[15] These Presbyterian men were not prepared, however, to acknowledge their view as that of Independency, partly because of

[12] JO, Vol. 16, p. 42.
[13] J. H. Thornwell, Vol. 4, p. 292.
[14] P. Masters, *Sword & Trowel*, 1985, No. 2, pp. 24-25.

their aversion to Congregationalism, which they always confounded with Independency. Although some Presbyterians had held to this same view in the seventeenth century, as has been noted above, we would claim this view under the name of Independency. This is because it was the Independents who developed it most fully and was uniformly upheld by them all, until they lapsed in the eighteenth century. There is no uniform witness to any particular view among the Presbyterians since all three opposing views that featured in the controversy of the nineteenth century have continued on among them to the present.

6.2.3 Absolute Equality View

We come to the third, and final, view. We have called it the "Absolute Equality View" because the distinction between the teaching elders and the ruling elders is erased. There is only one office of "presbyter". Witherow sweepingly claimed that "there has been a failure on all sides alike to reproduce the apostolic elder, and to put all members of the presbytery on that footing of official equality on which they stood in the New Testament age."[16] He made this charge against both the Westminster View as well as the Independent View. In place of these, he propounded the idea that any formal difference between presbyters was unjustified. All elders are entitled to preach, to ordain, and to conduct the sacraments, although circumstances are such that one of them often ends up doing most of the preaching by virtue of his training.

The weakness of such a view is obvious. Preachers are not made by training, but by being gifted and divinely called to their work and office. If it is argued that men may also belong to the same office who do not preach, or are not able to preach, then the vital meaning of the preaching office is undermined. The crux of the problem is that Witherow had failed to distinguish between the work of teaching and ruling. He had confounded the two "keys of the kingdom of heaven". In the words of Owen, "that these keys do include the twofold distinct powers of teaching and rule, of doctrine and discipline, is freely granted."[17]

[15] J. H. Thornwell, Vol. 4, pp. 97, 118.
[16] BT 235, p. 6.
[17] JO, Vol. 16, p. 107.

By denying the doctrine of the call, the priority of the ministry, as well as the distinction between teaching and ruling elders, the Absolute Equality View has the direct effect of undermining the Christian ministry. This had happened among the Plymouth Brethren and the Campbellites.

Witherow correctly rejected the Westminster View because it amounted to the introduction of a class of officer that is not warranted by Scripture. He was wrong, however, in rejecting the Independent View. The Independent View holds that all the eldership passages in the New Testament are references to one office, namely that of presbyters. In this one office are two sorts of elders, namely pastors and ruling elders. One key verse to support this is 1 Timothy 5:17, "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in the word and doctrine."

Witherow rejected the Independent View on the following grounds:[18]

i "There is no passage in Scripture except one, that even seems to indicate any distinction between teaching and ruling elders; if such a distinction really existed, it is strange that it crops up in no part of the New Testament except this solitary passage..."

ii "[In Paul's words in 1 Timothy 5:17] there is nothing in the language used to indicate that an elder had no right to take part in any other department of the work if he pleased. His words rather seem to imply that if an elder wrought in both departments of the work, and did well in both, he was especially deserving of double honour."

iii "To limit one class of elders to government, and to deny their right to give public instruction, is inconsistent with the qualification, 'apt to teach'."

The first objection cannot be admissible to any right-thinking man. That it should be raised at all is in itself amazing! We would contend that it is not the number of passages that matters, but the clarity of the truth that is declared in the passage. If a truth may be clearly established from but one verse, it has to be treated as binding upon the Christian. In any case, the truth that there is a

[18] BT 235, p. 6.

distinction between teaching and ruling elders does not rest on this passage alone. It rests also on Romans 12:7-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:28, which John Owen proved were references to the offices and officers, and not merely to the functions, of teaching and ruling.[19] Moreover, this truth is consistent with passages like Ephesians 4:11; Revelation 1:20; 2:1; and 1 Corinthians 9:1-18, as we have already shown in the previous chapter (Chapter 5, The Priority of the Ministry).

The second objection is not new. As pointed out by Thornwell, it had been thoroughly countered by John Owen in Chapter 7 of his book, "The True Nature of a Gospel Church".[20] Owen pointed out that the two words in the text contested over by exponents of different views in his day were "especially" (Greek, *malista*) and "labour" (Greek, *kopiôntes*).[21]

Those holding to the view that there is only one type of elders said that the "especially" is not *distinctive* but *descriptive*. The meaning of it, they claimed, is "as much as", or "seeing that"; "The elders that rule well are worthy of double honour, *seeing that* they labour," etc. Owen masterfully exegeted the text and proved that the word as used in the Bible and also in secular literature is always distinctive and not descriptive. Any Greek lexicon will show the correctness of what Owen said. Vine, for example, says that *malista* means "most, most of all, above all". It is the superlative of *mala*, "very much".[22] There is a comparison involved. This comparison is between the *elders*, not the work they perform. The honour is given to the men, not to the abstract functions of the men.

There were others who claimed that there is a distinction taught in 1 Timothy 5:17, but the distinction is in the work performed and not in the categories of elders. In other words, all elders are ministers of the word, but some work harder than others. Or, all elders are ministers, but some preach while others engage in other duties except preaching. There were even those who claimed that the phrase "labour in the word and doctrine" refers to a particular type of work, such as the work of an evangelist who is not confined to one place but travel everywhere to preach the gospel.

[19] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 123-129.
[20] J. H. Thornwell, Vol. 4, p. 118.
[21] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 115-130.
[22] Vine.

To this latter view, Owen showed that the word "labour" is not so used elsewhere in the New Testament. Instead, it is used in reference to elders fixed in churches (1 Thess. 5:12). To the former view, Owen pointed out that that would mean some elders are commended for not carrying out their duties fully, at least in comparison to the other elders – a position which Owen regarded as ridiculous. An elder who is negligent in his duties is worthy of blame, not of commendation. Said Owen:

> "It is therefore evident that this word (*kopiôntes*, labour) expresseth no more but what is the ordinary, indispensable duty of every teaching elder, pastor, or minister; and if it be so, then those elders, – that is, pastors or teachers, that do not perform and discharge it are not worthy of double honour, nor would the apostle give any countenance unto them who were any way remiss or negligent, in comparison of others, in the discharge of their duty. See 1 Thess. 5:12."[23]

The gist of Owen's view is that there are two sorts of duties – "ruling well" and "labouring in the word and doctrine", and there are two types of elders – teaching elders, to whom are committed the two sorts of duties, and ruling elders to whom are committed only the duty of ruling. All of them must carry out their duties well. The teaching elders are the pastors or teachers of the church.[24]

The third objection raised by Witherow had been countered by Dabney. We quote here his refutation:

> "And as to this ('aptness to teach'), we assert that the ruling elder needs it also just as truly as the preacher does, although not in the same phase, even if he is never to preach in public. It has been well remarked in support of this assertion, that the ruling elder should preach the gospel from house to house, that he should be the private instructor of all inquirers, that he should be a catechist and Bible-class teacher. This is true, but it comes very far short of the true strength of the case. Limit the

[23] JO, Vol. 16, p. 122.
[24] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 116-117.

> ruling elder's task as strictly as is possible to the business of ruling, and still his function is just as truly and as purely a *teaching function* as that of the preacher. He rules only by teaching; that is, his whole authority is exercised through an inculcative process. The only power exercised in church government is spiritual power; this power regards each man as a free agent, possessed of the right of private judgement, and hence its only support is that of didactic evidence. The church has legitimate power over the conscience only as she presents to that conscience, in the exercise of its private judgment, what ought to be adequate evidence that her command is scriptural. The sceptre of Christ's kingdom is His word; *to wield this is to teach*. And we would distinctly declare, that our tendency to consider that teaching must mean preaching alone arises only from our over-weening and unscriptural fondness for public preaching over the quiet, efficacious inculcation of the spiritual inspector. Had we used Christ's plan more efficiently we should not have contracted this perverted notion. Were ruling elders what they ought to be we should perhaps find that, so far from regarding preaching as nearly all the religious teaching, it is less than half. But we repeat, to rule is to teach; and therefore the ruling elder should be 'apt to teach,' although he is never to mount the pulpit."[25]

The very last phrase, "he is never to mount the pulpit", may have been a bit too strong. There are times when the ruling elder has to stand in for the preacher in the latter's absence. Be that as it may, the basic point made by Dabney is clear – the ruling elder rules by applying Christ's word. He, therefore, needs to have the ability to teach. We would have more to say on "the ability to teach" of 1 Timothy 3:3 in the following chapter (Chapter 7, The Unity of the Eldership).

Suffice to say at the moment that Witherow's objections to the Independent View are groundless.

It is clear that the controversies among the Presbyterians, in reality, revolved around the validity of the office of ruling elders. The

[25] R. L. Dabney, Vol. 2, pp. 145-146.

Presbyterian View, while advocating strongly the necessity of these additional men in the sessions or presbyteries, deny that they are actually *presbyters* of the New Testament sense. The *office* of ruling elders is thus denied. The Absolute Equality View claims that no distinction is to be made between the elders. There is thus a denial of both the *office* and the *officers*. Only the Independent View holds in balance all the truths that bear on the eldership, as taught in the New Testament.

While the Independent View of the eldership had been thoroughly worked out, and upheld across-the-board by the Independents in the seventeenth century, the churches soon lost all that they had worked for. Towards the end of that century, ruling elders were beginning to disappear from many churches. In New England, the ministers gave warning in the "Reforming Synod" of 1679 that, "Unless a church have divers elders, the church government must needs become either prelatic or popular."[26] A New England writer in 1715 spoke of the ruling elder as being as rare as "a black swan in the meadow". In Northampton, the office of ruling elder lingered until 1729 when its last representative died.[27] The ministers of the churches desired neither a "popular democracy", nor to be themselves independent "prelates". To guard against both extremes, the churches finally adopted the Saybrook Platform in 1708, in which Presbyterian connectionalism was advocated.[28]

The Independents in Great Britain fared no better. Although John Owen's large church of over one hundred members in London, which he pastored from 1673 to his death in 1683, had other ministers than himself, it did not have ruling elders.[29] The Particular Baptist minister, William Kiffin (1616-1701), had three able co-pastors to help him, but there appeared to be no ruling elders in the church.[30] The continual disruptions from persecution against the Nonconformists would have added to the difficulty of establishing the churches according to the order that the Independents believed in. In a period of impending persecution, Owen wrote to his church officers thus:

[26]I. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 16.
[27]I. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 345.
[28]I. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, p. 17.
[29]P. Toon, p. 157.
[30]B. A. Ramsbottom, pp. 78-81.

> "I could wish that because you have no ruling elders, and your teachers cannot walk about publicly with safety, that you would appoint some among yourselves, who may continually as their occasions will admit, go up and down from house to house and apply themselves peculiarly to the weak, the tempted, the fearful, those who are ready to despond, or to halt, and to encourage them in the Lord. Choose out those unto this end who are endued with a spirit of courage and fortitude; and let them know that they are happy whom Christ will honour with His blessed work."[29]

When better days dawned with the passing of the Toleration Act in 1689, the Independents were already established in their belief in the validity of ruling elders. That was the same year when Owen's "The True Nature of the Gospel Church" was published, and the 1677 Baptist Confession was re-affirmed by the Particular Baptists. Isaac Watts (1674-1748), an Independent minister during the period immediately after that, wrote "the generalities of Independents follow rather Dr. Owen's notions: ...That the power of church government resides in *the pastors and elders of every particular church*."[31] (Italics added.)

Efforts at appointing ruling elders were feeble, however. There was, at the same time, the contrary opinion of the Congregationalists that began to influence the thinking and practice of many Independents. Independency and Congregationalism, it must be remembered, was at this stage confounded as one and the same. Congregationalism was looked upon as an extreme, or "rigid", form of Independency. The Congregationalists had, from the beginning, denied the validity of ruling elders.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the office of ruling elders was rejected by many. John Gill (1697-1771), a leading Particular Baptist in his day, wrote, "The ordinary officers of the church are pastors and deacons, and these only; though antichrist has introduced a rabble of other officers, the Scripture knows nothing of."[32] The system that prevailed among the Particular Baptists was that of one

[29] P. Toon, p. 157.
[31] D. Fountain, p. 104.

pastor who was assisted by many deacons. John Gill himself rejected the suggestion to have a co-pastor to assist him.[33]

6.3 The Reformed Baptist Controversy

The system of "one pastor assisted by many deacons" continued among Particular Baptist churches from the time of John Gill to the time of C. H. Spurgeon (1834-1892). Spurgeon wrote this concerning his first pastorate:

> "When I came to New Park Street, the church had deacons, but no elders; and I thought, from my study of the New Testament, that there should be both orders of officers. They are very useful when we can get them – the deacons to attend to all secular matters, and the elders to devote themselves to the spiritual part of the work; this division of labour supplies an outlet for two different sorts of talent, and allows two kinds of men to be serviceable to the church; and I am sure it is good to have two sets of brethren as officers, instead of one set who have to do everything, and who often become masters of the church, instead of servants, as both deacons and elders should be."[34]

Another Baptist of the same period, Hezekiah Harvey (1821-1893), wrote this of the scene in America:

> "...our churches are generally organized under a single pastor, and many of the duties of the ancient presbytery, in the spiritual watch-care of the church, are transferred to the deacon's office. It is supposed that, in the changed circumstances of our age, this arrangement is not only lawful, but more expedient, especially as under it the pastor and deacons practically constitute a presbytery, and, so far as concerns the spiritual oversight, are often effectively doing its work."[35]

[32] J. Gill, Vol. 2, p. 574.
[33] P. Naylor, p. 157.
[34] C. H. Spurgeon, Vol. 2, p. 74.

Spurgeon's attempt at recovering the office of ruling elders was not universally followed by other Baptist churches. The rules of expediency and pragmatism, which Harvey spoke of, have had a strong hold upon most churches. This situation was to prevail until the recovery of the Reformed Faith in the nineteen-sixties. Reformed Presbyterians have inherited the three views of eldership from the controversy of the nineteenth century. Reformed Baptists have all but forgotten that the early Particular Baptists practised a form of church government distinctly their own. Instead of researching into *that* form of church government, the Reformed Baptists have looked to the Presbyterians and been unduly influenced by their views.[36] Unaware of the intricacies involved in the Presbyterian controversies, the adaptation of their practices into a Baptist setting has naturally led to confusion and chaos.

It is fair to say that all Reformed Baptists have a genuine desire to reform their churches in accordance to the teaching of Scripture. Many Reformed Baptist churches have recovered the practice of a plurality of elders, but not all of them are clear as to the nature of the office, the relationship that should sustain between the office-bearers, and the relative roles that they should play. One view that has come into prominence in recent years is that all elders are equal. A plurality of elders is recognised, but not the office of ruling elders. This is equivalent to the Absolute Equality View advocated by Thomas Witherow.

In the previous chapter (Chapter 5, The Priority Of The Ministry), we have noted that there were two strands of influence that appeared to have led to the emergence of the Absolute Equality View among the Reformed Baptists – one was the direct influence of Presbyterianism; the other was the pressure against the "one-man-ministry" arising from the charismatic movement as well as Brethrenism. There are thus two strains of the Absolute Equality View, each with its own ethos. The strain that is prevalent in America arose from the influence of Presbyterianism. It is more rigid,

[35]H. Harvey, pp. 76-77.

[36]The books published by the Banner of Truth Trust have been instrumental in drawing men to the Reformed persuasion. These have been appreciated by Baptists and Presbyterians alike. However, all the books on church order are presbyterian. One Reformed Baptist seminary in America that advocates the Absolute Equality View is known to use Presbyterian books on church polity.

more dogmatic, and more concerned for order and correctness. The strain that is prevalent in United Kingdom, which arose from the influence of the charismatic movement and Brethrenism, is more fluid, more casual, and more amiable in spirit. The two, however, share the same emphases on the "plurality" and the "equality" of elders.

In reaction to the Absolute Equality View, there are Reformed Baptists who have adopted the view that there are three distinct offices in the church – namely, minister, elders, and deacons. This is akin to the Presbyterian View. This is a three-tier system, in which the minister is above the elders, and the elders above the deacons, in authority. There are those who, out of fear that this sort of system might lead to authoritarianism in the minister, have adopted the Absolute Equality View, instead.

Peter Masters has exposed the many weaknesses of the Absolute Equality View.[37] We note here two dangers that the Absolute Equality View is prone to – namely, the extremes of the "committee syndrome" and authoritarianism. The "committee syndrome" sets in when there is no clear leadership provided by the pastor. All the elders are regarded as pastors. They are equal in power. They have equal right to preach. The elders may end up preaching in rotation, as has occurred in Brethren circles! There is also the constant tension of having to give deference to one another, or to prevent a strong personality in the eldership from having the pre-eminence in any way. The fact that one or two churches have functioned well with this system is no proof that it is correct. It only proves that the men involved have been long-standing friends who would have operated well in any other situation.

The Absolute Equality View is also prone to the danger of authoritarianism. Yes, authoritarianism can occur, even when there is a plurality of elders! In their desire to show that none of them is a "pope", the elders take great pains at working together in concert, each agreeing with the others in the exercise of rule. The eldership thus functions as an oligarchy, that is, rule by the few who are in office. Any attitude, any mood, and any thought that enters into a decision, is intensified by the cummulative assent of all the other elders. A decision that issues forth from such a situation can be devastating in its effect, especially when "heavy shepherding" (that is,

[37] P. Masters, *Sword & Trowel*, 1985, No. 2, pp. 25-29.

close pastoral care that intrudes into the legitimate liberties of the members) is practised in the church. This is particularly so when it has to do with the exercise of corrective discipline upon any church member. There is often an appearance of peace and harmony in the church simply because dissent of any sort is suppressed by the authoritarianism of the eldership. Careful observation will reveal that such churches, although claiming to function on the *theory* of equality, in reality *practise* clear leadership, often around one strong personality.

We have only considered the dangers that are *inherent* in the system. We have yet to consider how this view may cause damage to *other* churches, as has happened in various parts of the world. Some proponents of this view have been overly concerned about establishing what they believe to be a biblical eldership. And they are overly concerned that other churches should follow suit. These are the men who seem to be well-received by unsuspecting newer churches elsewhere. Their own churches have been built up and consolidated around the strong collective leadership, and they now try to impose their view on others. They have track records that may be paraded as "proofs" of the Lord's blessing upon them. They have the resources to send men (usually the dominant elder) around the world to minister to weaker churches. They are so cocksure of their particular brand of eldership and, therefore, easily gain a hearing in a world that is so unsure of itself. Newer churches, and young pastors who have not come to settled views, easily fall prey to the influence of such churches and individuals. Elders in the churches visited may have the "Diotrephes spirit" in them stirred up simply because they are treated as equal "pastors" by these visitors.

Just as pride had brought the downfall of Satan, so it has brought the downfall of many a potential church leader – and at what cost to the churches involved! 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. If that individual is an elder, or a deacon, a split is in the offing! 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. He is always opposing the pastor. The office-bearers' meeting becomes a hotbed

of tension everytime that he is present. He is always talking down to people and issuing directives to them because he is also "a pastor". People are put off by his over-bearing demeanor. Unhappiness develops in the church. The ministry is adversely affected. Either that individual be called into account, or the minister has to resign! If not wisely and firmly handled, a split will occur in the church, resulting perhaps with a number of sincere believers scattering in disillusion.

Borrowing John Owen's expression, we ask, "Is there no habitable earth between the valley of the Absolute Equality View and the precipitous rock of the Presbyterian View?"[38] Happily there is the third alternative, to which many Reformed Baptists are turning – the Independent View. It is the biblical view and, therefore, has all the divinely inbuilt safeguards against the dangers and weaknesses found in the other systems. This is not to say that a true system cannot be abused, misunderstood, or misapplied. What is probably needed today is a clear delineation of the characteristics of this view, so that the system stands out in its own right.

6.4 Assessment Of "Plurality"

So far, we have described the characteristics of the Absolute Equality View and exposed its weaknesses as a whole. We have not examined the principles that undergird that view in any detail. The Absolute Equality View advocates strongly the twin principles: (i) that there should be a plurality of elders; and (ii) that there should be an equality of elders. Partly because of constraint of space in this chapter, we shall deal with the first principle here and leave the second principle to the next chapter.

As has been shown, the issue in reality revolves around the validity of the office of ruling elders. Three New Testament passages in particular show that it is valid to have ruling elders in the church, distinct from the teaching elders: 1 Timothy 5:17; Romans 12:7-8, and 1 Corinthians 12:28. All the other New Testament passages that refer to elders must be taken to include both teaching elders and ruling elders. This was the view of John Owen.[39] This was also the view of the 1689 Confession, as is clear from the fact that the Bible references used to support paragraph 8 of chapter 26, in which the

[38] JO, Vol. 13, p. 5.

two continuing offices of elders and deacons are mentioned, include Acts 20:17, 28 and Philippians 1:1.

Quite apart from the fact that it is a biblical teaching, the needs of a church of any reasonable size would require more men than one to pastor it effectively. Of this point, Owen said: "The nature of the work whereunto they are called requires that, in every church consisting of any considerable number of members, there should be more elders than one (when God first appointed rule in the church under the Old Testament, He assigned unto every ten persons or families a distinct ruler, Dt. 1:15)..."[40] When ruling elders are appointed to help the pastor in shepherding the flock, there will naturally be a plurality of elders.

There are some advocates of the Absolute Equality View, however, who are not content with the mere recognition of *plurality*. They would insist that a church that fails to have a plurality of elders is unbiblical, and even sinful. When no other man is qualified or ready to be appointed as another elder of the church, there will be much fuss made of placing the single pastor under the pastoral oversight of another church. This insistence that there must be more than one elder in every church is argued from Acts 13:24 and Titus 1:5 – "So when they had appointed elders in every church...," and "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you." To this argument is added the fact that in every case in the New Testament "elders" are mentioned in the plural (Acts 15:22; 20:17, 28; I Pet. 5:1; James 5:14; 1 Tim. 5:17).

We have noted that it is not the number of Bible passages that determine the truth of a teaching, but how clear that teaching is, even if it is found in just one passage. In the present case, the truth that *the apostles* appointed a plurality of elders in each church is clear. But equally clear is the fact that there *were* churches that had no elders, at least for a time. Those who insist on plurality would want us to consider only the passages that show a plurality of elders in each church.

A fundamental mistake made here is the understanding of how an apostolic example is binding upon us today. In question here is

[39] JO, Vol. 16, p. 105.
[40] JO, Vol. 16, p. 114.

not the sufficiency and authority of Scripture, but *the way* by which apostolic examples are to be followed. Appeal is often made to 1 Corinthians 11:1 ("Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ."), and other similar verses, to support the claim that apostolic examples must be followed. A careful study of such passages will reveal that they do not teach that apostolic examples must be followed *in a crass and literal fashion*.

An apostolic *example*, such as the one recorded in Acts 14:23, sets the *norm* for us to follow. It is not a *command* of the category of "You shall not murder (Ex. 20:13)", or "Love one another, as I have loved you (Jn. 15:12)," whereby the deliberate breaking of it would constitute sin. The *ideal* of a plurality of elders in every church is set. Effort must be exerted towards achieving that ideal. When no effort is exerted, when no attempt is made, when that ideal is ignored, it is sin. As John Owen put it, an apostolic example "hath the force of a divine institution".[41]

However, John Owen also said, "extraordinary cases are accompanied with a warranty in themselves for extraordinary actings and duties".[42] Unlike the Roman Catholics, we believe that the ministry exists for the church, and not the church for the ministry. A church can exist without there being elders. In Acts 14:23 we are told that elders were "appointed in every church" (*kat' ekklesian*, "according to every church"). It does not say that the churches came into being through the appointment of elders. The churches were already in existence before the appointment of the elders. (See also Acts 9:31). Elders are essential only to the *well-being* of the church, not to the *being* of the church. When no qualified men are available, no elders should be appointed.

We see now that there were churches *without* elders, and there were churches *with* elders, in the apostolic time. We do not draw the conclusion from this that it is biblical for a church to have either no elder or more than one elders, but unbiblical to have only one elder! A church with only one elder should not be condemned as unbiblical or sinful when there are no other qualified men around to be appointed.

Then there is the factor of *the need*. Deacons were appointed to

[41] JO, Vol. 16, p. 197.
[42] JO, Vol. 16, p. 54.

fulfil an obvious need in Acts 6. A plurality of elders was needed in the generally larger congregations found in the New Testament time. The apostles functioned as elders in the Jerusalem church, and others were appointed to rule with them. We are told in Acts 15:22: "Then it pleased the apostles and *elders*, with the whole church,..." Again, in verse 23, "They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, *the elders* and the brethren,..." Numbered among the elders, who were not apostles, was James, the Lord's brother (Acts 15:13; Gal. 1:19). Today, it would be ridiculous to appoint five elders in a church that consists of, say, 10 members, half of whom are women. Many newly founded churches today are small compared to the ones in the time of the apostles. The generally bigger size of the churches accounts also for the plural "elders" mentioned in the other passages.

To be noted also is the fact that the early churches were far more mission-minded than the churches today. New churches were themselves undertaking church-planting work everywhere. Men were sent out to preach and establish works farther afield (Acts 8:14; 13:1-3; 1 Cor. 9:5; Phil. 2:25; Col. 1:7). Satellite groups were also established in the vicinity. The Corinthian letters were addressed not only to the church at Corinth but also to those "who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Cor. 1:2)", to the church at Corinth "with all the saints who are in all Achaia (2 Cor. 1:1)". All these works needed pastoral care before they became independent churches. The need for more than one elders in the mother church is obvious.

It needs to be said that some of the strongest advocates of "plurality" have been those who hold to the Independent View of the eldership. John Owen for one advocated it strongly.[43] John Murray also advocated it in the strongest of terms.[44] It is to be noted, however, that theirs was a plurality made up of teaching elders and ruling elders. These men had a good reason for emphasising plurality – they detested the autocracy exemplified in Episcopacy, and the anarchy exemplified in the more extreme forms of Congregationalism. They believed that the way to prevent both extremes from arising in the church is to have a plurality of elders. Murray, for example said:

[43] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 46, 114.
[44] J. Murray, Vol. 2, pp. 345-346.

> "This emphasis upon plurality indicates the jealousy with which the New Testament guards against government by one man. The New Testament institution is not, as we have seen, a pure democracy. Neither is it an autocracy. It is the simple truth that singularity has no place in the government of Christ's church. In every case the singularity exemplified in diocesan Episcopacy, whether it be in the most extreme form of papacy, or in the most restricted application of local diocesan bishops, is a patent deviation from, indeed presumptuous contradiction of, the institution of Christ. Plurality is written in the boldest letters in the pages of the New Testament, and singulariy bears the hallmark of despite to Christ's institution."[45]

More positively speaking, ruling elders are needed to help the pastor in the many duties of pastoral oversight. John Owen emphasised the importance of ruling elders in these words:

> "It is a vain apprehension, to suppose that one or two teaching officers in a church, who are obliged to 'give themselves unto the word and prayer,' to 'labour' with all their might 'in the word and doctrine,' to 'preach in season and out of season,'... with sundry other duties... should be able to take care of, and attend with diligence unto, those things that do evidently belong unto the rule of the church."[46]

We are today faced with a different set of problems. Reformed Baptists who practise "plurality" have themselves become authoritarian oligarchies. The validity of the office of ruling elder is denied. The principle of "plurality" is being bandied about as a new form of "shibboleth". In the face of these new problems, it would not be wise to stress "plurality". No, it might not even be *right* to do so.

It is preferable to advocate instead *the validity of the office of ruling elders*. This would be a wider principle that encompasses the concept of "plurality", for when ruling elders are appointed to help the pastor, would not there be a plurality of elders? The plurality

[45] J. Murray, Vol. 2, p. 346.
[46] JO, Vol. 16, p. 142.

advocated by the early Independents, like John Owen, was one in which both teaching and ruling elders share the rule – not one in which only teaching elders bear the rule. The word "validity" also prevents the principle from being insisted upon under all and every situation. It is valid to have ruling elders. One would, therefore, wish them to be appointed. Circumstances, however, may not permit any being appointed yet, in which case there would be no odium cast upon the church concerned.

6.5 Summary

1 The current fad to restore a plurality of elders in Reformed Baptist churches is in reality a struggle over the validity of the office of ruling elders. This controversy is not unrelated to the similar controversies among the Presbyterians in the past.

2 In the seventeenth century, the Presbyterians in the Westminster Assembly 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.

3 The controversy surfaced again in the nineteenth century. It ended with three distinct views, instead of two. The first view corresponds to the official position adopted by the Westminster Assembly, and may be called the Presbyterian View. The second view may be called the Independent View because it was most fully developed by the Independents in the seventeenth century, and was universally upheld by them. In this view, there are two sorts of elders – teaching elders who both rule and teach, and ruling elders who only rule. In so far as the government of the church is concerned, both categories of elders are equal in that they share the same office of ruling. In the third view, which we call the Absolute Equality View, any distinction between the elders is regarded as unjustifiable. All elders are regarded as pastors, who share the same functions.

4 Ruling elders gradually disappeared from among Independent churches in the eighteenth century, partly because the unsettled situ-

ation brought about by the persecution of Nonconformists prevented them from implementing the church order that they believed in. There was also the added influence of the Congregationalist belief in rule by one pastor, who is assisted by many deacons.

5 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. Presbyterians today have inherited all three theories of eldership from the controversy of the nineteenth century. Reformed Baptists today are fumbling about trying to recover a plurality of elders. A number of churches are now advocating the principles of plurality and equality, akin to the Absolute Equality View of the Presbyterians.

6 The Absolute Equality View of the eldership is prone to many dangers. One of them is the "committee syndrome" in which 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. Some strong advocates of the Absolute Equality View have caused much damage in other churches because of their view.

7 The Absolute Equality View emphasises two main principles – the plurality of elders and the equality of elders. The first principle is based on Acts 13:24 and Titus 1:5. 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. 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. As a church grows bigger, more elders are needed.

8 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*. Apart from minimising the possibility of autocracy in the minister, as often happens in Episcopacy, and anarchy in the congregation, as often happens in extreme Congregationalism, ruling elders are needed to help the pastor in the many duties of pastoral oversight.

Seven

THE UNITY OF THE ELDERSHIP

There are two principles that undergird the Absolute Equality view of the eldership: (i) that there should be a plurality of elders in every church; and (ii) that all the elders are equal in authority in every way. We have countered the first principle, and proposed that a better, more all-encompassing, and more accurate principle would be "the validity of the office of ruling elders". We now consider the second principle, namely that of "equality".

7.1 An Assessment Of "Equality"

This is based on the argument that in Acts 20:17, 28 and Titus 1:5, 7, the words "elders" and "overseers (or bishops)" are used interchangeably to refer to the same persons. From this, it is claimed that all elders are pastors, and that the difference between the elders is only in the functions they perform. The different functions are distributed by mutual agreement among the elders. As far as authority is concerned, all the elders have equal rights to perform all those functions.

7.1.1 First wrong assumption

This is a case of reading too much into the biblical data, and that on three counts. First, there is the assumption that no significant distinction is to be made between the elders since they occupy the same office. Note that we are here not questioning whether the same group of people are referred to in Acts 20:17 & 28, and Titus 1:5 & 7, for they are. These, and other passages such as 1 Peter 5:1-4 and Philippians 1:1, do only one thing, namely to make reference to those who rule. They do not indicate the *composition* of the eldership. Other biblical data should be taken into account to get the whole picture.

In contrast, the 1 Timothy 5:17 passage not only makes reference to the rulers but also indicates what sorts of rulers there are. The passage shows that there are two categories of elders – those who rule as well as teach (often called "teaching elders" for convenience), and those who only rule (often called "ruling elders" for convenience). Those who rule as well as "labour in the word and doctrine" are to be supported full-time (v. 18, cf. 1 Cor. 9:1-14). They are the "pastors and teachers" (i.e. the pastors who are teachers of the word) of Ephesians 4:11. They are the "angels" of the churches in Revelation 2 & 3, the "stars" in the right hand of the Lord in Revelation 1.

The Acts 20 and Titus 1 passages could, on their own, refer to either: (i) teaching elders only; (ii) ruling elders only; or (iii) teaching elders together with ruling elders. On the basis of 1 Timothy 5:17 and related passages, it is more likely than not that both teaching elders and ruling elders are referred to. This, as we have seen in the previous chapters (Chapters 5 and 6), was the view of John Owen and the 1689 Confession of Faith. The understanding of the priority of the ministry would have led the churches to appoint at least one teaching elder. The scarcity of preachers would have meant that the churches could not appoint too many teaching elders. The necessity of ruling elders to help in the governing of the churches would have led to some being chosen.

7.1.2 Second wrong assumption

The second wrong assumption that has been made is that all elders or overseers are pastors. That the words "elders" and "overseers" are used interchangeably no one would question. To claim that these words are interchangeable with "pastor" is to make an unwarrantable assumption.

The verb for "to pastor", or "to shepherd" (Greek, *poimainô*) is used in Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2, and not the noun (Greek, *poimên*). All elders are to take care of the church members in the same way that a literal shepherd takes care of his sheep – with tender care and vigilant superintendence. To take the verb "to pastor" and equate it with the nouns "elders" and "overseers" is to do violence to the texts. All elders do the work of shepherding, but it does not follow that they are the same as the pastors of the church. The elders in Acts 20 would have included pastors, but that is different from saying that all the elders were pastors.

In a previous chapter (Chapter 5, The Priority Of The Ministry), we have considered the point that the "pastors and teachers" of Ephesians 4:11 are mentioned in conjunction with apostles, prophets and evangelists, all of whom were people who handled the word of God. They are to be equated with the teaching elders of I Timothy 5:17. Those who feed God's people with His word are most appropriately called "pastors" because they fulfil the Old Testament prophecy that God "will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding (Jer. 3:15)".

The way we use language in everyday life helps us to see the truth that teaching elders are most appropriately called "pastors". A person who works as a professional sweeper, going from office to office to sweep the floor, is known as *the Sweeper*. Another person who works in an office as a clerk or manager may take it upon himself to sweep the floor occasionally. He sweeps the floor, and so does the professional sweeper. However, he would not be known as *the Sweeper*. All elders perform the work of pastoring the flock. The chief way the flock is pastored is by being fed the word of God. The elders who labour in the word and doctrine are, therefore, the pastors of the church. All pastors are elders, but not all elders are pastors.

7.1.3 Third wrong assumption

The third wrong assumption that has been made by those who advocate the equality of all elders is just that – the assumption of equality. The claim is made that since all are elders, all are equal in power, in standing before the church, and in rights to the performance of all duties. The 1 Timothy 3:1-7 passage is pressed into service. It is argued that since all elders must fulfil the qualifications listed there, they are equal. It is further argued that since the ability to teach is one of the necessary qualifications, all elders are entitled to preach. It is further claimed that since they perform the same function of preaching, they are all pastors!

There is here a failure to note that there are different degrees of any one of the qualifications. All are to be sober-minded, but some are more sober-minded than others. All are to be hospitable, but some are more hospitable than others. All are to rule their own households well, but some do better in this than others. Similarly, all are to have the ability to teach, but some are more able to teach than others. The possession of all the qualifications only qualifies the men for office; it does not make them absolutely equal. Since the ability to teach has been singled out for mention in the whole debate, let us consider it in greater detail.

The word "teach" (Greek, *didaskô*) in 1 Timothy 3:3 is used broadly to cover all forms of instruction, including preaching, private admonition, counselling, etc., in the same way that every believer should grow and become teachers (Heb. 5:12). The word can refer to, or include, the public instruction of God's word (1 Tim. 2:7, 12; 4:11; 2 Tim. 1:11; 4:2). It can also refer to private instruction (Acts 20:20; Mt. 11:1 cf. 13:36; 16:13; 18:1; etc.).

Another passage that is sometimes pressed into service by the advocates of equality is Titus 1:9, "... holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict." The word "exhort" (Greek, *parakaleô*) means to encourage or urge one to pursue some course of conduct.[1] Like the word "teach" in 1 Timothy 3:2, it is a broad term that covers both public speaking as well as private admonition.

[1] Vine.

In contrast, the word "preach" (Greek, *kêrussô*) always means the public proclamation of God's word. We see, then, that all preaching is teaching or exhortation, but not all teaching or exhortation is preaching. The Puritans saw a difference between preaching (that is, public teaching or public exhortation) and teaching (that is, private instruction or admonition).[2] To preach, or exhort, is to bring the truth to bear upon the conscience of the hearers, to stir their hearts with truths, and to aim to move them into action. To teach is to impart doctrine with the aim of removing ignorance, correcting errors, and informing the mind.

Scripture teaches that all Christians should grow in maturity to the point of becoming teachers of the word (Heb. 5:12-14; 1 Cor. 3:1-3). It is a well-known fact that in any congregation, the majority are those who have not matured sufficiently to be teachers of the word. It is also a well-known fact that there are few who are truly gifted to teach the word of God publicly. The scarcity of preachers is something to be expected since the Lord had Himself declared: "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Therefore pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest (Mt. 9:37-38)." Moreover, God's word is not to be handled carelessly. Not every Christian is expected to be an official teacher of the word (James 3:1; 1 Tim. 1:7; 2 Tim. 2:15).

The 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:9 passages require that all elders be able to teach. Whatever the degree of that ability, it must be there. One ruling elder may only possess the ability to counsel and encourage people, based on God's word, on a private basis. Another ruling elder may possess the ability to preach or exhort publicly, and he may be called upon to minister from the pulpit often. However, that is not the same as the work of a pastor, who is set apart to *labour in the word and doctrine*. The pastor is set apart for the task of ministering the word, and he is supported by the church financially (1 Tim. 5:18, 1 Cor. 9:1-18). This is the understanding of the person and role of the pastor in the 1689 Confession of Faith (Chapter 26, paragraph 10 & 11).

This does not rule out the possibility, under extraordinary circumstances, of having a pastor who earns a living by doing some other work. Also, there may be more than one pastor in a church.

[2] A. A. Davies, pp. 18-9.

The point we are making is that the ability to teach only qualifies a person for the office of elder. It does not require him to be the regular preacher. And it does not necessarily qualify him to be a pastor. To be a pastor, the ability to teach must be present to a high degree. Moreover, he must have the divine call to be a minister of the word.

The necessity of a divine call to the ministry is linked to the concept of "office". Some advocates of equality deny the concept of office explicitly, others implicitly. The emphasis falls upon the exercise of gifts, that is, upon the functions. That this cannot be right has been shown in Chapter 5, "The Priority Of The Ministry". "Office" carries with it the ideas that: (i) There are officers who fill the office; (ii) These are men who possess the necessary gifts; and (iii) They have been given the authority, by virtue of being in office, to perform their tasks.

A difference in functions indicates a difference in gifts and therefore, a difference in the individuals who possess those gifts. Since that is the case, how can there be the absolute equality of persons? The theory of equality cannot be right! Note that in 1 Timothy 5:17 double honour is to be given to the *persons*, not to the abstract functions of ruling and teaching. It seems that the advocates of *equality* wish to avert charges of "autocracy" and "a one-man-show", charges that are bandied about everywhere today. It may also be an attempt at applying the principle of the "priesthood of all believers" to the eldership. Honourable as this is, one must never downplay the distinction between the elders made by Scripture itself.

7.2 The Unity Of The Eldership

The only equality taught in Scripture with regard to leadership in the church is that of the *office* of elder itself. All elders are equal only 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 pastors in the church, one of them should be acknowledged as the leading elder.

The principle of *equality* advocated in the Absolute Equality View has the effects (or defects!) of denying the priority of the ministry, denying the concept of "office", denying the validity of the office of ruling elders, and leading to either authoritarianism or "committeeism", not counting other problems. As with the idea of "plurality", the advocates of the Independent View of eldership had themselves advanced the idea of "equality". They have been quoted by proponents of the Absolute Equality View to support *their* idea of equality. A careful scrutiny of what the advocates of the Independent View said, however, reveal that they were emphasising something quite different, and for a good reason. The reason was that they feared the extremes of episcopal autocracy and congregational anarchy. The thing they were emphasising was an equality *in point of rule*. In other words, they were emphasising the parity of the elders *by virtue of their occupying the same office of ruling*. John Murray, for example said:

> "The principle of parity is co-ordinate with that of plurality. Strictly speaking there can be no plurality if there is not parity. For if one is in the least degree above the others, then, in respect of that hegemony, there is no longer plurality. Plurality applies to all government of the church, and there must therefore be parity in the plurality. There is not the slightest evidence in the New Testament that among the elders there was an hierarchy; the elders exercise government in unison, and on a parity with one another."[3]

Murray's first assertion in this paragraph is open to serious question. Contrary to his assertion, there *can* be plurality even if there is no parity. Plurality simply means "more than one". Ten human beings may be in a room. Five of them may be men, and the other five women. They are similar, or "equal", only in the sense that they are all human beings, in the same room. Ten items may be in a box. Two are scissors, two are marbles, and the others match-sticks. They are the same, or "equal", only in the sense that they are things, in the same box. Plurality need not imply parity.

[3] J. Murray, Vol. 2, p. 346.

Be that as it may, our purpose here is to examine what he meant by "parity". He was speaking of a parity that "applies to all government of the church". He was speaking of elders who "exercise government in unison". It is clear that he was referring to all the elders with respect to their office of rule. All elders or bishops share the same office of rule. That is all the parity he was referring to. He said in another place. "In respect of ruling in the church of God, the ruling elder and the teaching elder are on complete parity."[4] Nothing can be clearer than that!

From this last quote, we see also that Murray believed that there is a distinction between the teaching elder and the ruling elder. Murray did not believe in the absolute equality of elders. He recognised the special and distinct role of the minister of the word who, in point of rule, and only in point of rule, is equal with the other elders. All these are clear from the following quote:

> "It is true that the minister as a teaching elder has his own distinctive function in the preaching and teaching of the word. He labours in the word and doctrine. It is natural and proper that his knowledge and experience should be given due respect in the deliberations which must be undertaken by the elders in the exercise of the government of the church. But it cannot be too strongly emphasised that, in respect of ruling, the minister of the word is on parity with all the others who are designated elders."[5]

John Owen also held to this understanding of the equality of elders. All elders are equal only in the sense that they share the same office of ruling. When there is a plurality of *teaching elders*, Owen asserted that *they* are equal. In every situation, one of the teaching elders is to be ihe leading elder. At the risk of labouring the point, we quote Owen:

> "...in the whole New Testament bishops and presbyters, or elders, are every way the same persons, in the same

[4] J. Murray, Vol. 2, p. 354.
[5] J. Murray, Vol. 2, p. 347.

office, have the same function, without distinction in order or degree;..."[6]

"But there is not any intimation in the Scripture of the least imparity or inequality, in order, degree, or authority, among officers of the same sort, whether extraordinary or ordinary. The apostles were all equal; so were the evangelists, so were elders or bishops, and so were deacons also. The Scripture knows no more of an archbishop, such as all diocesan bishops are, nor of archdeacon, than of an archapostle, or an archevangelist, or an archprophet. Howbeit it is evident that in all their assemblies they had one who did preside in the manner before described; which seems, among the apostles, to have been the prerogative of Peter."[7]

"...I will not deny but that in each particular church there may be many pastors with an equality of power, if the edification of the church do require it. ...And the absolute equality of many pastors in one and the same church is liable unto many inconveniences if not diligently watched against."[8]

"But whereas there is no difference in the Scripture, as unto office or power, intimated between bishops and presbyters, as we have proved, when there are many teaching elders in any church, an equality in office and power is to be preserved. But yet this takes not off from the due preference of the pastoral office, nor from the necessity of precedence for the observation of order in all church assemblies, nor from the consideration of the peculiar advantages which gifts, age, abilities, prudence, and experience, which may belong unto some, according to rule, may give."[9]

"It doth not hence follow that those who are called unto the ministry of the word, as pastors and teachers, who

[6] JO, Vol. 16, p. 44.
[7] JO, Vol. 16, p. 46.
[8] JO, Vol. 16, p. 105.
[9] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 105-106.

> are elders also, are divested of the right of rule in the church, or discharged from the exercise of it, because others not called unto their office are appointed to be assistant unto them, that is, helps in the government; for the right and duty of rule is inseparable from the office of elders, which all bishops or pastors are."[10]
>
> "They (the ruling elders) are joined unto the teaching elders in all acts and duties of church-power for the rule and government of the church;... Both sorts of elders are joined and do concur in the same rule and all the acts of it, one sort of them labouring also in the word and doctrine. Of both sorts is the presbytery or eldership composed, wherein resides all church authority. And in this conjunction, those of both sorts are every way equal, determining all acts of rule by their common suffrage. This gives order, with a necessary representation of authority, unto the church in its government."[11]

We repeat. When equality was emphasised by the advocates of the Independent View, it was meant to counter episcopalian autocracy on the one hand, and congregational arnarchy on the other. The Presbyterian View fails to maintain a proper equality among the elders, since the ruling elder is not truly a presbyter of the New Testament sense, in that system. The Absolute Equality View wrongly stretches the principle of equality too far, to the point of erasing the distinction between the teaching elder and the ruling elder.

In view of all these, it would seem best to emphasise the principle of "the unity of the eldership" instead of "the equality of all elders". By unity here is meant a oneness that is both *quantitative* and *qualitative*. The eldership is quantitatively one in that all the elders, considered together, *constitute one body*. The eldership is also qualitatively one in that it should *function as one body*. This principle covers the full intent of the advocates of the Independent View when they emphasised equality. It also avoids all the defects inherent in the Presbyterian View and the Absolute Equality View.

This is no new principle that we are proposing. It was already suggested by the advocates of the Independent View, except that it

[10] JO, Vol. 16, p. 111.
[11] JO, Vol. 16, p. 138.

was never emphasized or singled out as a principle in its own right. For example, we have quoted John Murray as saving, "the elders exercise government *in unison*."[3] (Italics added.) He also said:

> "Finally, there is the argument that pertains to *the unity of the office of ruling*. In respect of ruling in the church of God, the ruling elder and the teaching elder are on complete parity."[4] (Italics added.)

Similarly, we have quoted Owen as saying, "Of both sorts is the presbytery or eldership composed, wherein resides all church authority. And in this conjunction, those of both sorts are every way equal, *determining all acts of rule by their common suffrage.*" (Italics added.) Furthermore, Owen said:

> "... the whole work of the church, as unto authoritative teaching and rule, is committed unto the elders; for authoritative teaching and ruling is teaching and ruling by virtue of office, and this office whereunto they do belong is that of elders, as it is undeniably attested. Acts 20:17; etc. All that belongs unto the care, inspection, oversight, rule, and instruction of the church, is committed unto the elders of it expressly;..."[10]

The principle of "the unity of the eldership" actually arises from all the "elders" passages of the New Testament. The words "elders" and "overseers" are used interchangeably in Acts 20:17 and 28, and in Titus 1:5 and 7, because of this reason – the eldership is one. This accounts for why elders are always mentioned in the plural (e.g. Acts 14:23; Phil. 1:1). This explains why only two offices, and not three, are referred to in the church (e.g. Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-13). 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 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17 cf. 7). For the same reason, no distinction is drawn between the two categories of elders when pastoral oversight is referred to, but a clear distinction is made when preachers of the word are referred to (1 Thess. 5:12; Heb. 13:17; 1

[3] J. Murray, Vol. 2, p. 346.
[4] J. Murray, Vol. 2, p. 354..
[10] JO, Vol. 16, p. 111.

Pet. 5:1-4; James 5:14 cf. Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Cor. 9:14; Col. 4:12, 17; James 3.1; Rev 1:20; 2:1).

This principle of "the unity of the eldership" runs parallel to the principle of "the unity of the church" (1 Cor. 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. The principle of "the unity of the eldership" is clearly rooted in the Bible.

This leads to a corollary of the principle, namely, that the whole eldership is responsible for both the teaching and the rule of the church. The two "keys of the kingdom of heaven" – the authority to teach and to rule – are 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 *responsibilty* 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 faithfully and effectively delivered to God's people. Any defect in the teaching of the church must not be blamed on the preacher alone, but on the whole eldership. This does not mean that the ruling elders should be dictating to the preacher on what he may, or may not, preach. The preacher must be given the liberty to plan out a preaching syllabus, and to preach according to his assessment of the needs of the church, as he is led by the Spirit of God. On his part, the preacher needs to take into consideration the occasional suggestions of the other elders with regard to his preaching.

There are other practical implications to the principle of "the unity of the eldership", which we shall consider in a later chapter (see Chapter 10, Rule With Consent). We quickly draw to a close the discussion on the eldership in this, and the previous two, chapters.

7.3 Differences On The Eldership

We have discussed at great length the different theories on the eldership as held in Presbyterianism and Independency. In the Presbyterian View, the principles of *priority* and *unity* are upheld, but not that of *validity*. In the Absolute Equality View, the principle of *unity* is upheld, but not those of *priority* and *validity*. In the Independent View alone are all three principles upheld. All three views of the

eldership continue to be seen in Presbyterianism today. What is the prevailing practice in each of the other forms of church government?

7.3.1 In Episcopacy

Episcopacy practises an hierarchy of church officers in which the power of rule is more prominent than the power to teach. The bishop is not an officer of a local congregation. Instead, he is a clergyman who stands outside of, and above, the many local congregations over which he has the authority.

The minister of the local church has authority to rule and teach only within the prescribed parish that he is placed. His sphere of authority is thus circumscribed by a geographical boundary instead of by the dictates of Scripture and gospel opportunities. The whole system is plagued with unbiblical inconsistencies so much so that there is no eldership to speak of. There may be ministers who uphold the primacy of the ministry, but they are not presbyters in the biblical sense. It is, therefore, not possible to speak of the priority of the ministry, nor of the unity of the eldership, in such a system. The validity of the ruling elder's office is denied.

There is also a clear distinction between the "clergy" and the "laity". The clergy consists of officers called priests and deacons. There are also priests, known as "archdeacons", who function as disciplinary officials of the bishop.

7.3.2 In Congregationalism

Congregationalism, although acknowledging the distinct person of the pastor, tends to undermine the ministry of the word by its insistence on "the priesthood of all believers" (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). This doctrine, which basically teaches the privilege and right of believers to approach God directly without the necessity of mediation by human priests, as was the case in the Old Testament dispensation, is wrongly understood and abused in many churches that practise Congregationalism. Although the pastor is considered to be "first among equals", he is also a servant of the church.[12] The humility of the minister tends to be emphasized at the expense of his dignity. The principle of democracy, namely that it is the church members who rule the church, is woikcd out to its logical conclusion of denying

the pastor the authority to rule. Instead, the church is ruled by an "executive committee", or "council", which is made up of the pastor and a number of deacons, or it may include other church members, of whom one is the chairman. The principle of *the priority of the ministry* cannot, therefore, be said to be upheld in Congregationalism. Since there is no eldership of the biblical sense in the system, it is not possible to speak of *the validity of the office of ruling elders* or *the unity of the eldership*.

Congregationalism has not changed much over the years. It was, from the beginning, a system that stood in stark contrast to Independency. It is amazing that it should ever be treated as one expression of Independency. Isaac Watts described the view of the Congregationalists (that is, the "rigid Independents") in his day by these words:

> "The tenets of rigid Independents are: First, that every church has all the power of governing itself in itself, and that everything done in the church must be by the majority of the votes of the brethren. Second, that every church has its minister ordained to itself, and that he cannot administer the ordinances to any other people, and if he preaches among others it is but as a gifted brother."[13]

The autonomy of the church was conceived of in these rigid terms. The minister was not permitted to administer the ordinances in another church, nor was he recognised as a minister of the gospel outside his local congregation. The Confession of Faith of 1611, which was adopted by the General Baptists in England, states the same belief in Article 22:

> "That the officers of every church or congregation are tied by office only to that particular congregation whereof they are chosen (Acts 14:23; 20:17; Tit. 1:5). And therefore they cannot challenge by office any authority in any other congregation whatsoever except they would have an apostleship."[14]

[12] *Baptist Handbook*, p. 50. See also pp. 51, 79-80.
[13] D. Fountain, p. 104.
[14] W. L. Lumpkin, p. 122.

The same confession denies any distinction between teaching elders and ruling elders. Article 21 of the confession requires that elders and deacons be chosen according to the rules in the New Testament, adding that "there being but one rule for elders, therefore but one sort of elders."

The General Baptist Confession of Faith of 1651 is even more explicit on this point.[15] Articles 58 to 63 refer to the appointment, work and support of the ministers of the word. Articles 64 and 65 refer to the office of deacons. Article 66 deals with the qualifications of these two classes of church officers. The Confession moves on to discuss other matters. There is no mention of the office or work of ruling elders! Although the two confessions of faith allow for the possibility of more than one ministers being appointed to each church, it is easy to understand how the General Baptists soon settled into the practice of having one pastor and many deacons. This is the practice of most of the General Baptist churches today. Other congregational churches have adopted the same practice.

7.3.3 Among Reformed Baptists

It remains now to consider the practice of Independents today. We have seen how the Independents generally lapsed into the practice of the Congregationalists, of having one pastor who is assisted by many deacons. Our concern here is mainly with the Reformed Baptists. Among them, there is largely a return to the practice of having a plurality of elders. Due to unclear thinking, and the influence of Presbyterianism, Brethrenism and the charismatic movement, a number of Reformed Baptist churches have succumbed to the Absolute Equality view of the eldership. This view is today being propagated by a small group of rather vocal Reformed Baptists. As we have seen, this is not the view taught in the 1689 Confession of Faith, despite the contrary claims of the advocates of Absolute Equality.

It is only fair to say that many advocates of the Absolute Equality View still hold to a high view of the Christian ministry. They believe in the primacy of the word, and of preaching. Some of them would, in fact, affirm the doctrine of the call to the ministry. The problem, however, is that they are unable to reconcile the doctrine of the call

[15] W. L. Lumpkin, pp. 184-185.

to their view of *equality*. If one elder is called to the ministry of the word, he straightaway has the priority over the other elders who do not preach regularly. This would contradict their understanding of *equality*. They are left with the options of either saying that all the elders are called to the ministry, or dropping the doctrine of the call altogether. If they choose the former, and understand the call to the ministry in the traditional sense, they would have the difficulty of accounting for the presence of elders who are purportedly called but who are content to be rulers only in the church, and not preachers! Since they are not prepared to choose the latter, they fumble in the attempt to reconcile their view of the eldership with the doctrine of the call.[16]

In Presbyterianism, the minister is ordained as a preacher, not only to one local congregation, but to all the churches in the denomination. The ruling elders on the other hand, hold office only in their respective congregations.[17] The distinct role of the minister is, therefore, safeguarded. This is true even in the Absolute Equality view of the eldership. This safeguard is lost when the Absolute Equality View is adopted into a Reformed Baptist church. Since the church is believed to be independent and autonomous, and a pastor is ordained only to that church, his distinct role is erased when all elders are regarded as pastors. In order to safeguard the ministry, there would have to be only one elder, who plays the role of the sole preacher and ruler of the church. This would be nothing other than the Congregational practice! We have seen that this was exactly what happened with John Gill. When this happens, the office of ruling elders disappears! Iain Murray was right in sounding forth the warning against this danger.

> 'But it is noteworthy that where "the eldership" has been adopted by churches other than Presbyterian, and where the limitations placed upon ruling elders in the constitution of Presbyterianism are absent, many problems have frequently emerged. These problems, more than anything else, contributed to the cessation of ruling elders in the Independent and Congregational Churches.'[18]

[16] A. N. Martin seemed to have struggled with this. To my knowledge, no solution has been offered to reconcile his teaching on equality (on tapes MI-M-64 to 66) with the doctrine of the call to the ministry (in his book "Prepared To Preach").

Unlike Iain Murray, however, we believe that Independency is the correct form of church government, and that it possesses its own safeguard to the priority of the Christian ministry as well as the validity of ruling elders. We would contend that it was departure from the principles of Independency that led to the disappearance of ruling elders in the Independent churches. That Presbyterians like Thornwell, Miller and John Murray should have adopted the Independent View of the eldership is a cause for rejoicing. A more succinct delineation of the Independent View is needed, however.

It is tenuous to use the principles of the plurality and the equality of elders to define the eldership in a church. The eldership would be better defined by the principles of *the priority of the ministry*, *the validity of ruling elders*, and *the unity of the eldership*. That way, the whole emphasis is shifted to broader principles, and not focused upon the individuals and the power they have, or do not have. The danger of majoring on minor issues, and thereby distorting the biblical perspective, would then be avoided.

Historically, Presbyterianism had been plagued with serious disagreements on the eldership, which remain largely unresolved up to today. The way ahead for Reformed Baptist churches is not to follow or adopt any version of Presbyterianism, but to recover full-blooded Independency!

7.4 Summary

1 The Absolute Equality View maintains that all elders are equal because the words “elders” and “overseers” are used interchangeably in Acts 20:17, 28 and Titus 1:5, 7. This is a case of reading too much into the passages. There is, first, the assumption that no significant distinction is to be made between the elders. Other passages like 1 Timothy 5:17, however, show that there are two sorts of elders – namely, teaching elders and ruling elders. Then, there is the assumption that the words “elders” and “overseers” are interchangeable with the word “pastor”. This is not right be-

[17] In some Presbyterian churches, a ruling elder is still an elder if he moves to another congregation. The distinction between ruling elders and teaching elders is preserved, however.

[18] I. Murray, BT 235, p. 9.

cause the verb for "pastor" is used in Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2, and not the noun. Finally, there is the wrong assumption that the elders are equal in every way since the same qualifications are required for men to be appointed to office. However, that 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.

2 The only equality taught in the Bible with respect to leadership in the church is that of the office itself. 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. Within that office, the pastor has the priority over the other elders.

3 Since many problems have arisen from the different views of eldership, it would be better to use the principle of "the unity of the eldership" than "the equality of all elders". The eldership is quantitatively one in that all the elders, considered together, *constitute one body*. The eldership is qualitatively one in that it should *function as one body*. The principle of "the unity of the eldership" arises from all the "elders" passages of the New Testament, and is clearly rooted in the Bible.

4 A corollary of the principle of *unity* is that the whole eldership is responsible for both the teaching and rule of the church. There are important practical implications to this truth.

5 In Episcopacy, there is no eldership of any kind. In Congregationalism, the functions of the eldership has 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 in the biblical sense, it is not possible to speak of "the validity of ruling elders" or "the unity of the eldership".

6 Presbyterianism has inherited the three views of eldership from the nineteenth century – namely the Presbyterian View, the Independent View, and the Absolute Equality View. The principle of "the unity of the eldership" is upheld in all three views. The principle of "the priority of the ministry", although denied by the

Absolute Equality View, is safe-guarded by the Presbyterian system. The principle of "the validity of ruling elders" is denied in the Absolute Equality View, and inconsistently upheld in the Presbyterian View because the ruling elders are not regarded as true presbyters.

7 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 the office of ruling elders", and "the unity of the eldership".

Eight

POPULAR ELECTION

Many churches today appoint office-bearers in ways that are far from biblical. The prevalent opinion is that the Bible does not give clear teaching on such practical matters, and it is therefore left to everyone to do what is right in his own eyes. Those who hold to a high view of Scripture, believing it to be sufficient, authoritative and final in all matters of faith and practice, would want to know what exactly is the true biblical position on this matter. It is to this subject that we now turn.

The Bible indicates that there are two steps involved in the appointment of office-bearers: *election* and *ordination*. The meaning and scriptural validity of this distinction will become clear as we proceed in their explication in this chapter and the next. The process of election consists, in practice, of two steps – determining the qualifications of the candidates, and electing them.

8.1 Qualifications Of Elders

God's word lays down clearly the qualifications needed of men who are being considered for office. Yet, in so many situations today, churches would appoint persons to office with no due regard given to these biblical qualifications. Instead, a candidate for office is questioned on some subjective "call" that cannot be clearly verified. It is not uncommon, too, that the prospective office-bearer is chosen on the basis of his academic qualification, his current profession in life,

and his status in society. A medical doctor, a lawyer, or a university professor is deemed automatically qualified for office. The spiritual and objective tests of Scripture are thus replaced by carnal, subjective, and pragmatic considerations. How we must lament the current state of affairs!

The main passages that are relevant to us include 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:6-9 and Acts 20:17-38. Other relevant passages include 1 Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrews 13:7,17; 1 Peter 5:1-4; and 1 Timothy 5:17-24. There are many ways of analysing the main passages. For our purpose, we shall consider the prospective candidate for the office of overseer under three main headings – the man in his essence, the man in his character, and the man in his gifts. We shall consider for the moment those qualifications that are common to all elders, without distinguishing between teaching elders and ruling elders, apart from passing allusion of differences where necessary.

8.1.1 The man in his essence

The obvious assumptions of these portions of Scripture are that the candidate must be *a believer* and also *a church member*. An unregenerate man, however regular he is in attending the public meetings of the church, however civil and courteous he is in his behaviour, and however exemplary he may be in outward conformity to the law of God, is disqualified from service in the kingdom of God. Such was the rich young ruler in Luke 18:18-30.

The candidate for office must also be a member of the church. Although it is not wrong to call a pastor from another church, for the communion of churches and the recognition of a man as a minister of God's word warrant it, the normal method is to choose an elder from within the midst of the immediate congregation. The man, when appointed, will be shepherding the flock of God's people. The members of the congregation must know the man personally and be able to willingly entrust their souls unto his care. This personal knowledge and trust cannot be there if the candidate is not from the same congregation and is not a member of that church.

The candidate must be *a man*, that is, of the male sex. Obvious as this may seem, it needs to be stated clearly in this age when there is so much clamour for the ordination of women presbyters – in the establishment churches as well as in free churches. The relevant Bible

passages specifically require only males for the office of presbyters (1 Tim. 3:1, 2; Tit. 1:6). Moreover, this is consistent with the overall divine pattern of male leadership – in society, in the home, and in the church (Gen. 3:16; Eph. 5:22-24; 1 Cor. 11:3; I Tim. 2:8-15).

The candidate must be *spiritually mature*, and not a young convert (1 Tim. 3:6). The word "elder" itself means "an older man".[1] This points to a man of spiritual and mental maturity. Young converts are prone to pride and rashness in action. He may be old in age, but as long as he is a new believer, he will lack wisdom and discretion of the spiritual kind. A relatively younger man is not disqualified from office, provided he is not a new believer and he posseses the spiritual and mental maturity well beyond his years.

Furthermore, he must be one who is *chosen of God* (Acts 20:28 cf. 13:2; Eph. 4:11). His character and gifts will be the objective indications as well as confirmation of this (Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:28-29; 1 Tim. 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 Tim. 3:1; 1 Pet. 5:2).

8.1.2 The man in his character

It is not required that the man be married before he can hold office. But if he is married, he should be *a husband of one wife*. A man who practised polygamy from before his conversion must be deemed disqualified from ever holding office as long as he currently has more than one wife. Polygamy is a manifestation of a decadent culture. The patriarchs may have practised polygamy, but that never received the sanction of God's word. That which was tolerated by God must not be wrongly taken as approved by Him.[2] What is to be done by, or to, the converted polygamist is a matter that belongs to the discipline of ethics, and will not be discussed here.[3]

A man's character is determined by what he is in himself, and what he is like in his relationship to others. In both areas, he must

[1] Vine.

[2] J. Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, Ch. 3. This can also be taken literally as "a one-woman-man", denoting the quality of his relationship with his wife.

[3] See J. J. Davies, *Evangelical Ethics*, for a discussion of some of the relevant issues involved.

be *blameless* and a man of *high moral qualities* (1 Tim. 3:2, 7). He must have a good reputation in the church as well as outside the church. We are, of course, not saying that he will always be well-spoken of by the enemies of the gospel.

In himself, he must be temperate, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, and a lover of what is good. He must be one who is 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 who is of good behaviour, hospitable, and gentle. He must be one who is not quarrelsome, not quick-tempered, and not violent.

One quality of a ruler in Christ's church that is emphasized in the Bible is a lowliness of mind, or a "servant spirit". "You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Mk. 10:42-45)." "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock (1 Pet. 5:2-3)."

A "servant spirit" must not be confused with a servile attitude. A true leader is never servile towards man. A fear of God will ensure that he never fears man. "The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe (Prov. 29:25)." "We ought to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29)." Equally, the lack of fear of man must not be confused with a domineering attitude. The Bible uses many military images to convey lessons on the Christian life. Also, many of God's servants in the Old Testament were military leaders. The preponderance of such military images in the Bible, together with the influence of the world's idea of leadership, might give a distorted picture of what is expected of an elder's character.

An elder should not be seen barking orders, with one arm akimbo and the other pointing at the church member addressed. He should not put on an imperious and haughty demeanor. Members should not feel that they are being "pushed about" and being under the control of any elder. True, there may be occasions when a sharp

rebuke is necessary, but that need not come from an elder who is domineering in spirit. "A servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth,... (2 Tim. 2:24-25)." A "servant spirit" is so important.

8.1.3 The man in his gifts

Two basic gifts should be found in him – *the ability to rule*, and *the ability to teach*. 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 would be 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 to a tyrant, but as to a loving husband and father (1 Tim. 3:4-5; Eph. 5:22-6:4).

A relevant point to consider is whether or not the wife of the prospective elder needs to be a believer. Although it is not specifically stated that the wife should be a believer, 1 Timothy 3:1-13 does point to this requirement. If verse 11 is taken as a general qualification for both the wives of deacons as well as those of elders, the necessity of the wife being a converted person is beyond dispute. The verse reads as follows: "Likewise their wives must be reverent, not slanderers, temperate, faithful in all things." This is the description of believers. The word "reverent", or "grave", includes the idea of holiness.[1] William Hendriksen explains it as, "Spirit-wrought gravity and respectability."[4]

Elders, moreover, are to rule the church by setting good examples to all. How is the man going to set an example of himself in the matter of marriage if his wife is not converted? Christians are to marry "only in the Lord" (1 Cor. 7:39; 2 Cor. 6:11-18). Also, Christian values are reflected most clearly in marriage. Marriage reflects the relationship sustained between Christ and His church (Eph. 5:22ff.). Marriage affects the life and ministry of the elder to a great extent.

Take, for example, the qualification of hospitality required of the elder. The literal meaning of the word "hospitable" is "love of

[1]Vine.

[4]W. Hendriksen, *1 Timothy*, p. 130.

strangers". Its usage in the New Testament points to the correctness of the English translation, which means "to receive guests or strangers in the home" (cf. 1 Pet. 4:9). It would not be possible for the man to truly welcome guests to his home when the marriage partner is not a believer. She would not have the same concept of hospitality that the husband has, namely to receive the guests "in the name of Christ". Worse than that, she may object to the reception of guests in the home. "Can two walk together, unless they are agreed (Amos 3:3)?"

The wife of an elder should be a believer.

The case is quite different with the man's children. A man is not disqualified from office simply because his children are not converted. Conversion is of the Lord, and not of man. We do not believe with paedobaptists that children born to believing parents are "under the covenant" and are, therefore, "Christians" of some sort. They need to be regenerated by the Holy Spirit and be converted before we would definitely regard them as believers. It is not required of a man to wait until all his children manifest a credible profession of faith before he is appointed as an elder. It is only required that the prospective elder be "one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (v. 4)."

All 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: (i) he is in overall control of his household, (ii) he is making definite efforts to improve his relationship with his wife and in the disciplining of his children, (iii) progress is seen in these efforts, and (iv) none of his family members may be accused of insubordination or behaving as pagans (e.g. drinking, gambling, worshipping idols, consulting mediums, and the like, Tit. 1:6 cf. Eph. 5:18). This is basically what it means to "rule his own house well". A man who does not rule his household well cannot possibly rule the church of God well.

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 others and to edify them?

We have noted in a previous chapter that "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2) does not necessarily 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 (Tit. 1:9). Of course, in the case of pastors, it is required of them to have the ability to preach publicly. There are different degrees of the same qualification of "able to teach".

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.

We must always guard against the tendency to reduce, exceed, or deviate from, the divine requirements. The qualifications for elders are high, but they are not unachieveable. A careful study of the Bible will reveal that all the qualifications needed of an elder are expected also in every Christian. For example, high moral standards are required in the Christian life (e.g. Gal. 5:16-26; Eph. 5:1-21). Christian parents must rule their household well (Dt. 6:6-9; Eph. 5:22-6:4). Every Christian is expecled to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18; 1 Cor. 3:1-3). Every Christian should develop to the point where he can teach others (Heb. 5:12). Men who are being considered for eldership should have a pre-eminent measure of these qualities and abilities.

8.1.4 Comparison with deacons

It might be worth noting that the qualifications needed of deacons are similar to those needed of elders, except for the ability to teach, which is not required of the former (1 Tim. 3:8-13; Acts 6:1-7). This exception is understandable in view of the fact that elders and deacons perform different tasks – "the deacons to attend to all secular matters, and the elders to devote themselves to the spiritual part of the work".[5] This does not mean that the task of deacons is less valuable or less important. It is equally a "spiritual" work – one ordained by God, and geared towards 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, much less a pastor. John Owen made a point when he said, "The diligent discharge of the work of a deacon is not a due preparation for the office of the presbytery, but a hindrance of it; for it lies wholly in the providing and disposal of earthly things, in serving of the tables of the church, and those private, of the poor; but preparation for the ministry consists in a man's giving himself unto study, prayer, and meditation."[6] Of the two categories of officers, 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).

A deacon might conceivably be appointed to be an elder, but when this happens it must not be looked upon as "a promotion" for him. This would be carnal thinking, as it would imply that there are grades of glory for men in the church. Office-bearers are servants in the church. They are esteemed for their service, and not because of any worldly grandeur that is attached to the offices (1 Thess. 5:12-13; Heb. 13:17; Mt. 20:25-28; 23:11-12; Lk. 22:24-30).

The failure to abide by the biblical qualifications, especially in the appointment of elders, has resulted in many churches becoming weak and worldly. Instead of being led to closer conformity to God's word, and to new heights of spiritual accomplishment, the churches are led to adopt worldly methods of worship, worldly approaches in gospel work, and worldly understanding of church life. Churches that have begun to appreciate the necessity of continuing reform have had their efforts hindered by unqualified elders. Over-bearing elders or deacons have been known to affect adversely the ministry of the pastor and therefore the welfare of the church. How crucial it is to have a proper appreciation of the importance of the biblical qualifications for office!

[5] C. H. Spurgeon, Vol. 2, p. 74.
[6] JO, Vol. 16, p. 149.

8.2 The Call Of The Minister

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 the preacher of God's word he needs to be called of God to this task.

8.2.1 Differences on the "call"

There is considerable confusion among Christians over the subject of the call to the ministry. There are those who adopt a rational approach in the application of God's word, denying any idea of a subjective, personal call. There are others who would rely almost totally on subjective feelings, claiming a personal call of God that is hard for others to verify.

In Reformed circles, there was traditionally a belief in the doctrine of the call to the ministry of God's word.[7] Today, confusion appears to reign in certain circles because of the different views of eldership that are adhered to. Those who believe in the priority of the minister tend to treat him as an officer who is of a different order from the other elders of the church. The need of a special calling for the minister is maintained, but without reference to the qualifications for eldership mentioned in the New Testament. Others hold to the parity of all elders and claim that the qualifications in such passages as 1 Timothy 3:1-7 are all that is needed for the regular preacher, just as they are needed for the other elders. The difficulty with this view is the question of how to reconcile it with the doctrine of the call.

Yet others who hold to a view of eldership akin to the Witherow system have had to reject the doctrine of the call in order to be consistent. Their belief is that all elders are preachers, that the only difference between the elders is in the functions they perform, that one of them becomes the regular preacher by virtue of his greater

[7] In this chapter, we provide quotes from authors of different ecclesiological persuasions to show their general agreement on the doctrine of the call: C. H. Spurgeon and A. N. Martin (Reformed Baptist), John Owen (Independent), Paul Helm (Independent/Baptist?), Charles Bridges (Episcopalian), and Edmund Clowney (Presbyterian).

ability in preaching while others concentrate on administration and other duties.

The difficulty with this view is considerable. If the doctrine of the call is subscribed to, the difficulty is to explain how it is that there are elders who are content not to preach regularly when they claim to have been called to the ministry. Those who believe in the absolute equality of elders will have to either change the meaning of the doctrine of the call, or deny the necessity of a special calling from God for preachers of the word.

A. N. Martin underscores the difficulty of this subject of the calling of the preacher:

> "When I first began to study this subject in any great depth, I tried to surround myself with the masters who wrote on the subject. It was interesting to me to see the tremendous spectrum of perspective on the subject. I would say that way over on the left hand is Spurgeon, with his poetic and mystical temperament. Spurgeon takes a position with regard to the call to the ministry that would exclude many of us from this call, and would exclude many who *ought* to be in the ministry. He wrote such statements as these: 'If you can do anything else other than preach, then don't preach!' I do not think that there is any biblical support for such a statement. Spurgeon is very strong on the subjective element of a felt consciousness of the call of God – the *divine seizure*.
>
> On the other end of the spectrum which we might call the extreme right, is Dabney, who actually becomes sarcastic and lampoons this whole idea. He says 'how is the young man to be struck with this arrow of the heavenly Cupid which will make him fall in love for a task which he has never experienced, and concerning which he is basically ignorant?' Dabney, without realising it, goes after Spurgeon and lays him in the dust. Between Spurgeon on the left and Dabney on the right, there is Thornwell, who is a few degrees toward the centre from Mr. Spurgeon. Then there is John Newton, who is about dead centre. Finally, Edmond Clowney's excellent little book: 'Called to the

> Ministry' has, I believe, struck even closer to the biblical view."[8]

8.2.2 Its relation to biblical qualifications

It is not our purpose here to discuss this subject in detail. Our purpose here is only to attempt a reconciliation between the necessity of fulfilling the biblical qualifications and the need of a divine call for the minister of the gospel. This will then pave the way for the practical consideration of the appointment of elders, both the teaching and ruling ones.

We have first to recognize that elders are ordinary officers in the church. They are different from apostles or prophets who were chosen directly by God in extraordinary ways such as by audible speech, visions, or dreams. The extraordinary officers received their messages directly from God, while a pastor proclaims the already inscripturated word. Since a pastor is an elder, he must fulfil the qualifications of eldership found in the New Testament.

At the same time, it should be recognized that the pastor is a minister of the word and he stands on the same platform with the prophets of the Old Testament as well as with the apostles, prophets, and evangelists of the New Testament. There is this underlying principle of the continuity and perpetuity of God's word that runs through the Old and New Testaments. To the extent that he handles God's word like these other servants of God, the pastor shares certain things in common with them. Bible passages such as Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Corinthians 12:28, 31 underscore this point.

Although God's former ways of revealing His will to His people have now ceased (2 Pet. 1:19-20), there remains the fact that His truth needs to be proclaimed and applied to men. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to conclude that those who handle the word of God today need to be called of God in a special way. They have the same divine commission from God as the prophets and apostles had. "How shall they preach unless they are sent (Rom. 10:15)?" Paul Helm puts it this way:

> "The call to the ministry is extraordinary, not in the sense that it is miraculous, or accompanied by voices and vi-

[8] A. N. Martin, pp. 76-77.

> sions, but because by it a man is taken out of many of the routine commitments of daily life. In particular he ought to be freed from the need to earn his daily living in order to give himself exclusively to the word of God (1 Tim. 5:17). And so to be a minister of the gospel is not to pursue a career, nor is it to carry on a family tradition. No one is naturally in the ministry, or fitted for it.
>
> The call to the ministry is extraordinary also in the sense that it arises out of the ordinary. The biblical pattern is that generally a person will carry on a normal calling, continuing in the place that God in His providence has put him, and it is when he is inwardly constrained to preach the gospel, and his gifts – his ability to handle Scripture, to preach, to give leadership – are recognised by the church, that his inward call comes to be outwardly ratified. It is as these inward and outward circumstances combine that a man has the warrant for leaving his regular calling and attempt to obtain a position of pastoral oversight."[9]

It is the determination of how this call comes to God's servants that constitutes the doctrine of the call.

8.2.3 Gifts to edify others

As we examine the literature on this subject, we quickly realize that the masters on the subject are agreed that there should be two indications – gifts to edify others with, and a desire for office. First, there should be *a prominence of the necessary gifts* to edify others. Edmund Clowney says, "The call of the word of God to the gospel ministry comes to ALL those who have the gifts for such a ministry."[10] John Owen mentioned this as the first qualification of the minister – that he should be furnished with spiritual gifts and abilities by the Holy Spirit in an unmeasurable fullness.[11]

This requirement does not contradict the qualifications of the elder in such passages as 1 Timothy 3:1-7. What we may say is that

[9] P. Helm, pp. 66-67.
[10] E. P. Clowney, p. 79.
[11] JO, Vol. 16, p. 49.

those qualifications should be seen more prominently in the one who is called of God to be a minister of His word. All elders do not possess all those qualifications to the same degree of intensity or development. Out of ten qualifications, he may have three to a high degree of development, five of them average, and two of them somewhat weak. A minister would need to have something like five of them well developed, three of them average, and two somewhat weak. We may further say that the ability to preach should be among his five prominent qualifications. The ability to preach well requires more than mere eloquence of speech. It requires an uncommon sharpness in the understanding of truth, a judicious ability to apply the truth, and a matching spirituality of character to contain and channel these gifts to the act of preaching.

We are not saying, then, that a candidate for the ministry must have all the gifts already well developed before he is appointed. That would be an unrealistic demand that is at the same time unbiblical. The experienced Timothy was urged to constantly progress on in the ministry, and he was to stir up the gift of God in him (1 Tim. 4:15; 2 Tim. 1:6). What is required is that most of the necessary qualifications should be found in him to some degree of development already, since he must not be a novice in the faith, at the same ume that the other gifts are there which will develop more fully with time.

8.2.4 Desire for office

Another indication of the calling of a man to be a minister is the presence of *a desire born of right motives*. The prophet Jeremiah could say that the word of God "was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, and I could not (Jer. 20:9)." Amos could say, "A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The Lord God has spoken! Who can but prophesy (Amos 3:8)?" The apostle Paul could say "necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel (1 Cor. 9:16)!" This desire may be equated with what is mentioned in 1 Timothy 3:1, "This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good thing." If it is argued that there is a difference between the desire to exercise some gifts and the desire for office, we would reply that in the divine economy, gifts are exercised by God's servants in the context of their offices.

It should be noted that the "desire" mentioned in this first verse is not among the "must be" qualifications of 1 Timothy 3. It is not absolutely required of an elder. It follows that an elder may or may not have this desire to hold office. One might be persuaded to hold office because of the crying need for an additional elder in the church. He serves *willingly*, but there may not be an actual *desire* to serve as an elder. Given a choice, he would rather continue on serving as an ordinary member of the church. The situation is different for a minister of the gospel. The desire to serve in the office will be there, and to a greater intensity than would be found in other elders. Again, it need not be there to the fullest measure of development. It may grow with time.

Edmund Clowney makes this observation: "Most often the presence of such gifts of the Spirit (for the ministry) creates a desire for their exercise. By them a man is drawn to the word, to Christ, to men. For this reason a deep and sincere desire to enter the ministry is the commonest evidence of the Lord's calling. It is no sure criterion, however, for the gifts and desire are not always joined." He pointed out that a man may have the gifts, but not the desire to serve. Such a man may be quenching the Spirit, refusing to recognise or use the gifts he has received from God (1 Thess. 5:19). It is as the gifts are used that the desire to serve Christ with them will increase. On the other hand, a desire to serve Christ in the ministry may become intense before there is evidence of the necessary gifts.[12]

The desire to serve Christ in the ministry may manifest itself in different ways. Some authors list these as separate indications of the call to the ministry. Owen, for example, mentions "compassion and love to the flock", "continual watchfulness over the flock", and "zeal for the glory of God".[13] It may also manifest itself in compassion for lost souls, so that the individual is constantly praying earnestly for friends to be saved and he is actively engaged in evangelistic activities. It may be manifested by a keen desire to read good books, to improve his knowledge of the Bible, and a keen interest in pastoral activities such as visitation and attending ministers' conferences.

We conclude this section by summarising as follows: (i) A can-

[12] E. P. Clowney, pp. 81-82.
[13] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 50-51.

didate for the ministry must possess all the qualifications required of an elder in such passages as 1 Timothy 3:1-7; (ii) In addition to this, there must be a desire to serve Christ in the ministry as well as the presence of the ability to preach; (iii) Together, these constitute the calling of a person to the ministry; (iv) Full justice is done to the facts that a minister is a servant of God who publicly proclaims God's word, at the same time that he is an elder and, therefore, an ordinary officer of the church.

8.3 Popular Election

8.3.1 The principle defined

The appointment of elders, whether teaching or ruling ones, begins with the recognition that there are biblical qualifications required of these office-bearers. Candidates must come to a sober assessment of themselves, as to whether they are qualified for office. This is one reason why these qualifications are recorded for us in the Scripture (cf. Rom. 12:3-8). One who aspires to be a pastor or minister must, further, be convinced that he is called of God to the task. This is often designated the "internal call" of the minister. When the aspiring office-bearer is convinced that he is equipped for office, this personal conviction must be confirmed and followed through by the "external call" of the church.

The necessity of, and relation between, these two "calls" are well-described by Charles Bridges:

> "The *external call* is a commission received from and recognized by the church, according to the sacred and primitive order; not indeed qualifying the minister, but accrediting him, whom God had internally and suitably qualified. This call communicates therefore only official authority. The *internal call* is the voice and power of the Holy Ghost, directing the will and the judgment, and conveying personal qualifications. Both calls, however, though essentially distinct in their character and source, are indispensable for the exercise of our commission."[14]

[14] C. Bridges, pp. 90-102.

Churches are disagreed about how this external call is to be extended to office-bearers. In the Church of England, the archbishops and bishops are chosen by the queen or king, while the subordinate clergy are appointed to their charges by the bishops, the mayor of the city, or some civil corporation. The same method is practised in the church of Rome, except that instead of the Crown choosing the pope, it is the college of cardinals who do so. Thus, in Prelacy, the members of any particular congregation are deprived of the right to choose their own leaders. In Congregationalism, we have the other extreme whereby the power of choice lies totally with the congregation. The members choose who they wish to be rulers, and they depose whichever ruler they are not happy with. Only in Independency and Presbyterianism do we find the principle of "popular election" in operation.

"Popular election", then, is the manner or method by which the church extends the external call to a minister or an elder. It accredits, or recognises, the man as qualified and called by God for office. It is "popular" because it is the people, that is, 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", as we shall show, is quite different from the modern idea practised in secular organisations, and which is adopted by many free, Congregational, churches today. The modern idea is that some individuals would put themselves forward as the potential candidates for office, they then campaign and lobby for votes, and finally the people choose from among the names that have been put forward. This is not the "popular election" that we are considering here.

8.3.2 The principle proven

That "popular election", of the biblical kind, is the right way of appointing office-bearers may be proven from the following considerations:[15]

i The calling of office-bearers is an act of the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven. This power was given by Christ to the church. It resides in the church, that is, the congregation of

[15] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 63-66.

God's people, but it is exercised by the elders. The existing elders of the church must, therefore, lead the church in the choice of new office-bearers, and the church must have the power to give its consent.

ii The church is a voluntary society (2 Cor. 8:5). The members voluntarily gathered together as a society, and are subjected only to the commands of Christ. They must voluntarily place themselves under the pastoral oversight of the elders whom they recognise as having been raised up by God for the church. Since it is the duty of elders to lead the church, they must guide the church in the choice of new office-bearers. In order that the members may be able to voluntarily submit themselves to the new office-bearers, they must give their consent to their appointment.

iii There are apostolic examples recorded in the Scripture which set the norm for us to follow in the appointment of office-bearers.

We turn now to consider these examples.

In the Old Testament, there were three ways by which this was done:[16] (i) By the immediate and extraordinary choice of God Himself, e.g. the call of Aaron to the priesthood, the call of Samuel to be a prophet, the call of Saul to be king; (ii) By physical descent, e.g. the descendants of Aaron succeeded him in the office of the priesthood; (iii) By the choice of the people, under the guidance of the existing leaders, e.g. the appointment of elders in Israel (Ex. 18:25 cf. Dt. 1:13).

The first of these ways was repeated in the foundation of the New Testament Church. Christ Himself was called to His office by the Father, through the Spirit (Isa. 61:1-3; Heb. 5:5). He, in turn, called the apostles prophets, and evangelists, in whom that call terminated. The second way was utterly abolished. The third way continued on to be the ordinary manner by which churches today are to appoint their office-bearers.

The first instance of the choice of a church-officer involved a combination of the first and last ways (Acts 1:15-26). As an extraordinary officer, Matthias had to fulfil the qualifications required of an apostle (vv. 21-22), and he was chosen by divine intervention

[16] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 55-56.

in the casting of lots (v. 26). An apostle had also to act as an ordinary officer of the church (Acts 6:1-7; Gal. 1:18-19; 2:9; 1 Pet. 5:1; 2 Jn. 1; 3 Jn. 1). As an ordinary officer, Matthias was chosen by the people, under the guidance of the existing church-officers.

The second instance of the appointment of office-bearers is found in Acts 6:1-7. Although the word "deacons" is not used, it is generally agreed that the office of deacon is here referred to. Again, the apostles guided the congregation to the choice of the right men by clearly delineating the functions and qualifications of that office. Also, it was the congregation – the multitude of disciples who had come together (vv. 1-2) – that made the choice.

The third occasion is found in Acts 14:21-23. Here, elders are appointed by Paul and Barnabas, and this in every church. The Greek word translated "appointed" (*cheirotoneô*) actually means to choose by stretching forth the hands (*cheir*, the hand, *teinô*, to stretch). The only other place where the same word is used is 2 Corinthians 8:19. There, it was the churches that had chosen the man to accompany the missionary team with the gift. 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 is involved in the choice of the elders.[17]

From these three examples recorded in the New Testament, we may draw the clear conclusions that office-bearers are to be appointed: (i) by the guidance of the existing elders, and (ii) with the consent of the congregation. These, in essence, make up the principle known as "popular election".

8.3.3 The principle applied

The passages of Scripture we have referred to above do not tell us the exact procedures to adopt in the choice of office-bearers. Acts 1:15-26 and Acts 6:1-7 show that the existing elders made known to the church the need of new office-bearers, proposed the number of officers to be appointed, and indicated the functions they were to perform when appointed. Apart from these, no normative procedures are taught. We must note that the Acts 1:15-26 passage was somewhat unique since an extraordinary officer was being ap-

[17] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 56-63.

pointed. It would, therefore, be hazardous to establish the casting of lots as a normative practice.

The 1689 Confession of Faith recognizes the silence of Scripture on the procedures to be adopted in the appointment of office-bearers. It, therefore, mentions only the main principles that we have discussed above. Chapter 26, paragraph 9, of the Confession states:

> "The way appointed by Christ for the calling of any person, fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit, unto the office of bishop or elder in a church, is, that he be chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the church itself; and solemnly set apart by fasting and prayer, with imposition of hands of the eldership of the church, if there be any before constituted therein; and of a deacon that he be chosen by the like suffrage, and set apart by prayer, and the like imposition of hands."

At this point, we must remember the teaching found in Chapter 1, paragraph 6, of the 1689 Confession of Faith:

> "...there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and 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."

The following procedures which have been successfully adopted by many Reformed Baptist churches, perhaps with minor variations, are suggested for the appointment of deacons and elders.

In the appointment of deacons:[18]

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

[18] Since the publication of the first edition of this book, the Reformed Baptist churches in Malaysia have adopted this procedure. The slightly different procedure adopted ealier, of having the church members submit their nominations individually to the elders after getting the consent of the nominees, was found to be ineffective in small congregations as is the case in most pioneering situations. It makes the nominator too "visible" before the members and elders.

ii At a church members' meeting, nominations are made by ballot. Each member writes down the names of those whom he thinks are qualified. 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 when the elders meet subsequently.

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. The nominees should have consented to their nominations when approached by the elders. The reasons for rejecting a nominee may be made known to the nominator(s), in private, if sought.

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.

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. This is to take into account such passages of Scripture as Titus 1:5, 1 Timothy 5:22, and 2 Timothy 2:2 – in which Titus was the one specifically instructed by Paul to appoint elders; Timothy was instructed not to lay hands on anyone hastily; and he was also to commit the task of preaching to faithful men. Titus 1:5 actually says, "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you..." The qualifications of the elder given in the subsequent verses were intended to help Titus in the task of appointing the right man for office. By parity of reasoning, the qualifications given in 1 Timothy 3 were meant to help Timothy appoint the right men as office-bearers. Just as Timothy and Titus were expected to initiate the appointment of elders, the existing elders of the church today are expected to do the same. If they have the authority to play such a significant role in the appointment of elders, we would expect also that they have the authority to veto in the lesser task of the nomination of deacons.

Just as other matters contained in the pastoral epistles were meant to be taught to the church members, the qualifications of

office-bearers were also meant to be taught to them. Otherwise, the church members would not have been able to give their consent to the proposals of Timothy or Titus. Moreover, as we have discovered from the book of Acts, the members of the congregation are to nominate men to the office of deacon. The slight difference in the procedures of appointing elders and deacons does not violate the general principles we have drawn out of the Acts passages, namely that the appointment of office-bearers must be by the guidance of the existing elders and with the consent of the church.

It may be argued that Timothy and Titus were apostolic delegates, or evangelists, and therefore no parallel may be drawn for our situation today. In answer to that objection, it must be remembered that just as Paul was to be imitated (1 Cor. 11:1; Acts 20:35), so also were Timothy and Titus to be imitated (cf. Heb. 13:7). They are not to be imitated in a crass, mechanical, fashion but rather in their attitude and way of life (cf. Phil. 2:5). They are to be imitated in so far as their behaviour accords with the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). Moreover, an apostolic example that is clearly not tied to the extraordinary circumstances of the time nor the extraordinary office of apostle, but instead is associated with the abiding relevance of the appointment of ordinary office-bearers, must be deemed normative. In the words of John Owen, "the example of the apostles... hath the force of a divine institution."[19]

The advantage of having the existing elders nominate the candidates for eldership is that there is no likelihood of a young man being appointed simply because he is popular with an immature group of young people who happen to form the majority in the membership of the church. Some churches do not practise this but allow the congregation to nominate the candidates as well as vote for the right men. This practice might not work out well for the church. If a candidate clearly lacks the biblical qualifications, the existing elders might possibly veto the nomination and, in the process, cause some unhappiness to the young people who nominated him. If the candidate does possess the necessary qualifications, but is not the best of choices available in the church, the existing elders might be put in a difficult position to veto. The church eventually ends up having a weak eldership since men who are more qualified than the ones

[19] JO, Vol. 16, p. 197.

nominated are not appointed.

Why do most churches adopt a two-thirds majority as indicative of unanimity in a vote? Why not a simple majority of 51% and above, or a 90% majority? There is no fixed rule in this matter. A simple majority would mean that nearly half of the membership is not in agreement with the choice of the elder – a situation that can hardly be justified. A 90% majority would set the edge too sharp to allow for a diversity of opinions to exist within the unity of the church. Also, it would mean that the church is, in effect, controlled by a minority of the members who may vote against the choice of the majority – a situation that is unacceptable. Most churches find that a two-thirds majority is just right to determine the wishes of the congregation. When prayerfully done, an office-bearer so appointed must be accepted as the choice of the Holy Spirit for the church.

Those nominated for office should be gathered aside by the existing elders before the day of election to explain clearly to them that some from among their number might not get enough votes to qualify for office. The very fact that all of them have been nominated is proof enough of the church's esteem of them. Should anyone of them not be elected, he should believe that this is God's indication that it is not time yet for him to be appointed. He must prove himself worthy to be considered for office by taking his failure to be appointed this time round graciously. Also, there is no need for the number of votes procured by each candidate to be announced. As long as the two-thirds minimum is procured, the person is deemed elected. This is to avoid conveying unwittingly to the congregation the idea that the one who has gained more votes is in some ways a better man than another who has obtained less.

There are Reformed churches today that would appoint office-bearers only on the basis of the biblical qualifications required of the men. The relevant passages in the book of Acts teach the validity of appointment according to the needs as well as the qualifications. This was the view of John Owen.[20] Also, it is valid to spell out the functions required of the prospective office-bearers. It would be pointless to appoint a new elder who is unable to fulfil the perceived need of, say, regular preaching in the church, due to his lack of time or ability. Similarly, it would be pointless to appoint a new deacon who is unable to take care of the accounts of the church when that

was the perceived need that led to his appointment to office.

The prior declaration of the functions to be performed by the prospective office-bearer means also that there will be no confusion over this matter once the appointment is completed. A man who is appointed to be a ruling elder will know that his main function is to rule the church and not to preach regularly in the pulpit. He will also know that his aim throughout is to play a supportive role to the pastor and not to compete with him. A man who is appointed to be another teaching elder in the church will know that his function is to help the first pastor to preach and rule the church. He will know that the first pastor is the leading elder while he is his assistant. This, of course, does not rule out the possibility of a change of assignment, or a sharing out of certain functions, between all the elders. A ruling elder who has been preaching occasionally might find his gift in this area improving over the years. If the personal conviction of God's calling to be a preacher becomes obvious, there is no reason why he should not be recognised as such. There would be no need for such a person to be ordained again, since the office of the teaching elder is one and the same as the office of the ruling elder. An official affirmation of his change of roles at a church members' meeting is all that is needed, followed perhaps by a public "recognition service".

C. H. Spurgeon appeared to have understood these principles well. When the need for another pastor arose, his younger brother, J. A. Spurgeon, was proposed as a helper to him. The terms were spelt out clearly to him before his appointment. Spurgeon's autobiography records the following:[21]

> "That, in the opinion of this church, the time has now arrived when some permanent help should be obtained to assist our beloved Pastor in the very arduous work connected with the pastorate of so large a church; also that we consider the most likely person to discharge this duty to the comfort of our Pastor, and the lasting benefit of the church, is our Pastor's brother, the Rev. J. A. Spurgeon..."
>
> "...a special church-meeting was held in January, 1868, at which it was decided to invite James Archer Spurgeon,

[20] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 112, 114, 129.
[21] C. H. Spurgeon, Vol. 2, pp. 78-79.

> who was three years younger than his brother, to become Assistant or Co-Pastor of the Church. At the same time it was explained to him by letter that, should the Lord call his brother Charles home, it would not follow that he would automatically succeed him in the pastorate. Nor while he was Co-Pastor must he assume that the office gave him the right to occupy the pulpit at the Tabernacle in the absence or illness of Charles. These delicate matters were stated with complete candour but in gracious words, and James Spurgeon found no difficulty in accepting the Church's stipulations. During the remainder of his brother's life 'he did a vast amount of daily routine work at the Tabernacle, of which the outside public heard little and knew less, but in the doing of which he proved the most effective assistant to the senior pastor that could possibly have been provided... The two brothers appeared to be at one in everything; but the chief reason of their being able to work in unison as they did was that they were agreed in doctrine'."

The next step that is necessary to complete the appointment of office-bearers is their ordination, which is the subject of the next chapter.

8.4 Summary

1. God's word lays down clearly the qualifications that are needed of men who are being considered for the offices of elder and deacon. The main passages are 1 Timothy 3:1-13, Titus 1:6-9, and Acts 20:17-38. We must guard against the tendency to reduce, exceed, or deviate from the standards set by God for office-bearers.

2. A candidate for the office of elder must possess the following qualifications: (i) In essence, the person must be a believing male member of the church who shows signs of being chosen of God for the office by his character, gifts, and willingness to serve in that capacity. (ii) In character, if a married man, he must be the husband of one wife. He must be blameless, and

possess high moral qualities. He must also possess a "servant spirit". (iii) In ability, he must be able to rule, and to teach. To rule is not merely to carry out administrative duties or to execute some plans, but to lead and care for people. For a married man, his ability to rule his household well is clearest proof that he has the ability to rule in God's church. The ability to teach involves giving the correct explanation of the Bible's teaching and applying it to the conscience of enquirers.

3. The qualifications for deacons are similar to those for elders, except that there is no requirement for them to have the ability to teach.

4. Apart from the qualifications needed of an elder, a candidate for the Christian ministry must possess the necessary gifts to edify others as well as a desire for the office that arises out of right motives. Among the gifts necessary to edify others, the ability to preach the word of God must be obvious.

5. From the examples recorded in Acts 1:15-26, Acts 6:1-7, and Acts 14:21-23, we learn the principle that the appointment of office-bearers must involve the guidance of the existing elders and the consent of the congregation. This principle is known as "popular election".

6. The exact procedures for the appointment of office-bearers are not given in the Bible. From the Acts 1:15-26 and Acts 6:1-7 passages, we learn that the existing elders must 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 case of the appointment of new elders, the existing elders nominate the candidates while the congregation elects from among them. This difference in procedure is based on the examples of Titus and Timothy, who were given the responsibility to appoint elders. These procedures do not violate the principle of "popular election".

7. The principle of "popular election" is practised in Independency and Presbyterianism, but not in Episcopalism. Congre-

gationalism practises a form of democratical election which is quite different from the biblical “popular election”.

Nine

ORDINATION

Two steps are necessary to complete the call, or appointment, of an elder or a deacon to office – election and ordination. The process of election has been dealt with in the previous chapter. It remains now to consider ordination. What is the meaning and purpose of this act? in what ways do churches differ concerning this activity? These are some of the questions we shall attempt to answer.

9.1 The Nature of Ordination

Ordination may be understood from its characteristics, its purpose, and its meaning.

9.1.1 Its characteristics

The characteristics of ordination may be determined from a number of relevant passages in the Bible. We consider first the appointment of the ordinary officers of the church.

Acts 6:5-6 says, "And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch, whom they set before the apostles; and when they had prayed, they laid hands on them." Election clearly came before ordination. The ordination of deacons involved only prayer and the laying on of hands. No fasting is recorded.

Acts 14:23 says, "So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed." Two distinct acts may be seen – the elders were appointed, and they were commended to the Lord by prayer and fasting. The first act was the election, while the second was the ordination.

We consider next the appointment of extraordinary officers. They had extraordinary calls from God, but they were ordained by the existing officers of the church.

Acts 13:1-3 says, "Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers.... As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, 'Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away." It is to be noted that, here, Paul and Barnabas were not being ordained to be "apostles" in the primary sense of the word. Paul was already an "apostle" in that sense (Gal. 1:1-24; 2:7-9; Rom. 1:1; 2 Cor. 12:12). Nevertheless, the two men are called "apostles" in Acts 14:14 in the general sense of being "sent out ones". The word "apostles" appears to be used in this same general sense in 1 Corinthians 9:5 and Romans 16:7. In our days, they would have been called "missionaries". The early churches were far more mission-minded than is often realised.

That raises the question whether Paul and Barnabas were ordained to an *office* or merely to a *task*? An office would necessarily involve the function associated with that office. A function, however, need not be performed by one who is in office. From all the other instances recorded in the Bible, we know that ordination is always to an office, never merely to a task. If Paul and Barnabas were appointed to an office, to which office were they appointed? Ephesians 4:11 lists only four offices of ministers of the gospel. The nature of the office of "teacher" mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament has been discussed in detail in Chapter 4 and will not be repeated here. If Acts 13:3 was a case of ordination to an office, it would most likely have been the office of evangelist. Evangelists were "apostles", or missionaries.

On this understanding, Paul remained an apostle of Jesus Christ at the same time that he was an evangelist (that is, an "apostle" in the general sense of the word). He was also an elder in the church

of Antioch (Acts 13:1). It is not uncommon for one person to hold more than one office. Christ, for example, occupies the offices of prophet, priest and king at one and the same time. The pastor-teacher of Ephesians 4:11 encompasses the offices of "minister" and "elder" (see Chapter 5, The Priority Of The Ministry). In the early church, with its strong mission-mindedness, many evangelists were ordained. Among them were those who were at the same time deacons. An example was Philip (Acts 21:8). Stephen appears to be another example (Acts 6:5, 8). There would have been no need for Philip or Stephen to relinquish their office as deacons since they continued to be closely associated with, and actually operated from, the church in Jerusalem. As with Paul and Barnabas, who had to report back to the sending church after each missionary journey, we would expect Philip to have done the same (Acts 14:26-28). Caesarea appeared to have been an outreach-point – a satellite – of the Jerusalem church (cf. Acts 21:10). The work there was initiated by Philip in his itinerant ministry (Acts 8:40).

It may be rebutted that, on this understanding of a person holding more than one office, the way would be paved for a person to be appointed both an elder and a deacon in the church. Our answer is – No, a person may not be ordained to be both an elder and a deacon. The evangelist was a minister of the gospel (Eph. 4:11). He was a full-time preacher (1 Cor. 9:1-14). The *office* of evangelist has ceased, although its *function* continues. Today, a deacon might conceivably be set apart to perform the task of the evangelist full-time. Such a man might be reckoned not ready for the office of elder, perhaps because of some disqualifying deficiency in him (1 Tim. 3:1-7). He need not relinquish his office as deacon so long as he qualifies for, and is able to function in, that office. Another man may be an elder who is now set apart to such full-time preaching. He has, in effect, become a pastor. Common sense would dictate that a person who is qualified to be a ruling elder should not occupy the office of deacon at the same time. No good purpose is achieved, since the function of the lesser office of deacon is subsumed under the greater office of elder. In other words, when a person is an elder, he may perform the function of a deacon. The reverse does not necessarily follow, however.

We return from this slight digression to consider the ordination of Paul and Barnabas to the *office* of evangelist. Although debatable,

this understanding of the ordination of Paul and Barnabas does explain why it was carried out at all. This pre-empts our discussion on the meaning of ordination.

One more passage should suffice to determine the characteristics of ordination. We read in 1 Timothy 4:14, "Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery." Although the burden of the verse is upon "the gift" which was imparted, it was done in connection with Timothy being appointed as an evangelist (2 Tim. 4:5). Hands were laid upon him, most probably by the elders of the church in Lystra (Acts 16:1-3). Paul seemed to have taken part in that ordination (2 Tim. 1:6).[1] The office of evangelist to which he was ordained may have been an extraordinary one, but the ordination *per se* does not appear to have anything extraordinary in it.

From all these references, we are driven to the following conclusions about ordination:

i Ordination and election are distinct and co-ordinate 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 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. Num. 27:22-23). The exceptional situation in which there is no previously ordained elder will be considered below.

[1] W. Hendriksen, *1 Timothy*.

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.

9.1.2 Its meaning and purpose

Since election and ordination are distinct acts, differences have arisen over their relative significance. Some have treated ordination as something that is optional, while others have given to it a significance more than is warrantable. It behoves us to be clear on the meaning and purpose of each of these acts. Let it not be thought that we are "splitting hairs" over terms!

By the process of election, a person is recognised and accepted into office. Both the elders and the congregation are involved in that process. That is the essence of election. 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.

Since ordination is a distinct and separate act, what purpose does it serve? This may be determined from the significance of its constituent elements – the laying on of hands, prayer, and fasting. Although not specifically stated in Scripture, it is commonly understood that the *laying on of hands* involves the placing of the right hands of the ordainers on the head of the ordained. One or more of the ordainers then prays for the person being ordained.

John Calvin made this helpful observation about ordination:

> "This form was derived, I think, from the custom of the Jews, who, by the laying on of hands, in a manner presented to God whatever they wished to be blessed and consecrated. Thus Jacob, when about to bless Ephraim and Manasseh, placed his hands upon their heads (Gen. 48:14). The same thing was done by our Lord, when He prayed over the little children (Mt. 19:15). With the same intent (as I imagine), the Jews, according to the injunction of the law, laid hands upon their sacrifices. Wherefore, the apostles, by the laying on of hands, inti-

> mated that they made an offering to God of him whom they admitted to the ministry; though they also did the same thing over those on whom they conferred the visible gifts of the Spirit (Acts 7:17; 19:6).... And it is certainly useful, that by such a symbol the dignity of the ministry should be commended to the people, and he who is ordained, reminded that he is no longer his own, but is bound in service to God and the church."[2]

John Owen clearly held to this view of ordination, saying, "It is required that persons so chosen... be also solemnly separated, dedicated unto, and confirmed in their office by fasting and prayer. As this is consonant unto the light of nature, which directs unto a solemnity in the susception of public officers – whence proceeds the coronation of kings, which gives them not their title, but solemnly proclaims it, which on many accounts is unto the advantage of government – so it is prescribed unto the church in this case by especial institution."[3] Ordination, then, 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.

Since the communication of the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit has been withdrawn, this being the sign given to extraordinary officers (2 Cor. 12:12; Mk. 16:18) for the specific purpose of confirming the word of God that came through them (Heb. 2:3-4), 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 ordainer to ordained.

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

[2] J. Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk. 4, Ch. 3, paragraph 16.
[3] JO, Vol. 16, p. 68.

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 (Eph. 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.[4]

9.2 Ordination In Independency

In the face of the clear teaching of Scripture, it comes as somewhat of a surprise to hear that many churches today, including some Reformed Baptist ones, do not place any importance on ordination. This is unfortunate because it will only lend credence to the charge of the Presbyterians that the Independent theory of church government identifies or confounds election with ordination. James Bannerman, for example, said:

> "By many of the Independent churches the ceremony of ordination is entirely discarded; while by those of them who retain it, it is regarded, not as the act of the church setting apart an individual to office, but simply as the act of the members and office-bearers in alike uniting together in prayer for a blessing upon the office previously conferred by election of the members."[5]
>
> "With Independents, ordination is not the act of the church admitting to or investing with the office of the ministry, it is a convenient and becoming religious service that may or may not take place in connection with a man's beginning his labours in the office. The election of the people has already admitted him to office; and ordination is a ceremony that has nothing to do with that admission as necessary to it."[6]
>
> "The fundamental error of the Independents in regard to ordination is, that they hold it to be no divine appoint-

[4] JO, Vol. 16, p. 67.
[5] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 455.
[6] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 471.

> ment for admitting to the office of the ministry. That admission is the act of the people in electing their pastor; and because ordination is not the appointed method of admission to the office, it can have no special or appropriate blessing attached to it. The key in their denial of any peculiar value in ordination is, then previous denial that it is an act of the church admitting to the office of the ministry."[7]

Bannerman was here grossly misrepresenting the Independent position. Part of his problem was the constant confusion of Independency with Congregationalism. Added to that was his Presbyterian understanding of election and ordination, which he used as a yardstick to judge all other systems. We will have occasion to point out the Presbyterian errors regarding ordination below. Our purpose at the moment is to point out the militancy of notable Presbyterians in their onslaught against Independency. Another example of this will suffice. Thomas Witherow said this of Independency, the "Independency" that was according to his own understanding:

> "The office-bearers of the apostolic church were set apart to the discharge of their peculiar duties with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. Among Independents, however, ordination of any sort is not essential; frequently it is counted unnecessary. Instances are known of persons acting as pastors of churches for a lifetime, who were never inducted to office with the imposition of hands and prayer. Ordination is not required by the system. With them it is a mere matter of taste, left in each case to the individual choice. If the newly-elected pastor chooses to have himself ordained, it can only be done in a way inconsistent with Independent principles. The congregation, being destitute of a plurality of elders, his ordination can only come from the people, who have no scriptural right to confer it, or from the neighbouring pastor. But who does not see that the latter practice is entirely at variance with the foundation principle of Independency, namely, that each congregation has *within* it-

[7] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 472.

> self complete materials for government? So much is this felt to be the case, that, while some ask the assistance of the pastors of the district on such occasions, those who choose to carry out their Congregationalist principle with a little more consistency make light of ordination, think it unnecessary, and prefer to go without it."[8]

That the early Particular Baptists believed in ordination is easily proved from the 1689 Confession of Faith. Chapter 26, paragraph 9, of the Confession says:

> "The way appointed by Christ for the calling of any person, fitted and gifted by the Holy Spirit, unto the office of bishop or elder in a church, is, that he be chosen and solemnly set apart by fasting and prayer, with imposition of hands of the eldership of the church, if there be any before constituted therein; and of a deacon that he be chosen by the like suffrage, and set apart by prayer, and the like imposition of hands."

Although the word "ordination" is not used, the act of ordaining is clearly taught. We need not be too fastidious to enquire into the reasons why the word is not used. Suffice to say here that to "set apart" was to "ordain", for it involved prayer, fasting and the imposition of hands. This is easily proved from John Owen who, in writing about the ordination of the pastor, says, "...with solemn ordination, or *setting apart* unto the office and discharge of it by prayer with fasting,..."[9] (Italics added.)

The framers of the 1689 Confession were careful to note that the ordination of elders should include fasting, with prayers and the imposition of hands, while the ordination of deacons need not include fasting. This is in accord with apostolic practice (Acts 14:23 cf. 6:6). The necessity of fasting in the ordination of elders is also underscored by Owen who says, "But there hath been less regard unto the other duty, namely, that these prayers should be accompanied with fasting; but this is also necessary by virtue of apostolical example (Acts 14:23)."[10]

[8] T. Witherow, p. 64.

[9] JO, Vol. 16, p. 68. See also pp. 74 and 92.

[10] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 72-73.

The question may be asked, Who fast – the elders of the church or the members? Ordination is performed by the elders of the church. Fasting should be seen as part-and-parcel of the act of ordination, just as prayer and the imposition of hands are the constituent elements of ordination. The elders of the church should, therefore, fast at least a day before the ordination. Fasting is a discipline that is largely lost to evangelical Christians today. So momentous an occasion as the ordination of elders should be accompanied by fasting on the part of the existing elders as well as those who are being ordained. The church should, of course, be of one heart with the elders in praying for the occasion.

The 1689 Confession refers only to the situation when there are elders previously appointed in the church. The question may be asked, How is ordination to be performed when there are no elders in the church? This situation might conceivably arise in a new church. Owen answers that in such a situation, "the assistance of pastors or elders of other churches may and ought to be desired unto the conduct and regulation of the duty".[11] The Independents of New England stated explicitly in the Cambridge Platform of 1648:

> "In such churches where there are elders, imposition of hands in ordination is to be performed by those elders (1 Tim. 4:14; Acts 13:3; 1 Tim. 5:22).
>
> In such churches where there are no elders, imposition of hands may be performed by some of the brethren orderly chosen by the church thereunto. For if the people may elect officers, which is the greater, and wherein the substance of the office consists, they may much more (occasion and need so requiring) impose hands in ordination, which is the less, and but the accomplishment of the other (Num. 8:10).
>
> Nevertheless in such churches where there are no leaders, and the church so desire, we see not why imposition of hands may not be performed by the elders of other churches. Ordinary officers laid hands upon the the officers of many churches: the presbytery at Antioch laid hands upon Paul and Barnabas (1 Tim. 4:14; Acts 13:3)."[12]

With Owen, we should add that although election and ordination are ordinarily required of a church in the appointment of office-bearers, a defect in any of these, especially if it be from *unavoidable circumstances*, does not disannul the call of a person to office. This is because "extraordinary cases are accompanied with a warranty in themselves for extraordinary actings and duties".[13] This does not in any way underrate the importance of ordination. Summarising the procedures involved in the call of a person to the pastoral office, Owen said:

> "...although I will not say that a defect in any of these, especially if it be from unavoidable hinderances, doth disannul the call of a person to the pastoral office yet I must say that where they are not all duly attended unto, the institution of Christ is neglected, and the order of the church infringed."[14]

9.3 Differences On Ordination

Ordination, as taught in the Bible and practised by Independents, are denied in other systems of church government in various ways.

9.3.1 In Prelacy

In Prelacy, ordination is perverted by claiming unto it more than is warranted by Scripture. The Church of Rome holds to the idea of *apostolic succession*, in which it is believed that for an ordination to be valid, it must be performed by officers of that church who have been ordained successively from the time of the apostles. It is further claimed that Christ has committed to the church a deposit of grace and authority and spiritual virtue, communicable to office bearers, without which their office is null and void. Ordination is a sacrament which confers the Holy Spirit, supernatural graces, and

[11] JO, Vol. 16, p. 73.
[12] I. Murray, *The Reformation of the Church*, p. 254.
[13] JO, Vol. 16, p. 54.
[14] JO, Vol. 16, p. 74.

priestly power *ex opere operato* (i.e. "out of the action performed"). This is the "series theory" of apostolic succession.[15]

Other Episcopal churches, such as the Church of England, believe in the "conveyance theory" of apostolic succession, in which ecclesiastical power and authority are transmitted from the ordainer to the ordained. The Church of England differs from the Church of Rome in a number of matters connected with ordination, but in two things they agree. First, they agree in ascribing to the church the power of communicating the Holy Spirit to the person ordained, thereby conveying to him supernatural grace and power with which to administer the word of God and the ordinances. Second, they agree in ascribing to the church the power of conferring the office of the priesthood, and of making real priests and not ministers.[16]

9.3.2 In Presbyterianism

The traditional statements on ordination of the Presbyterians appear to be the same as that of the Independents. There are, however, major differences between them from the start. We have already quoted John Calvin's view on ordination above. In "The Form of Presbyterial Church Government" drawn up by the Westminster Assembly in 1645, ordination is described as "the solemn setting apart of a person to some public church office". So far, so good. However, the same document goes on to say, "It is agreeable to the word of God, and very expedient, that such as are to be ordained ministers, be designed to some particular church, or other ministerial charge."

What accounted for this somewhat unusual statement? Is it not understood that a minister should be ordained to a church? The answer lies in the Presbyterian understanding of the church, and therefore, of the ministerial office. In Presbyterianism, there is the belief in a visible universal church. It is claimed that a man may be "ordained a minister of the church universal, free to exercise the office wherever providence may open the way to him".[17] The pastoral office is separated from the ministerial office and thereby, separating election from ordination. Election pertains to the pastoral office while ordination pertains to the ministerial office.

[15] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, pp. 437-451.
[16] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 475.
[17] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 433.

We would contend that the creation of the office of "a minister at large" has no warrant in Scripture. We would further contend that it is against the teaching of Scripture to separate ordination from election. A lot of inconsistencies arise as a result, which we shall now examine.

Scripture reveals that there are only four ministerial offices – those of apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers (Eph. 4:11). There were other preachers sent out by the church who were "ministers" or "apostles" (in the general sense of the word), but these men are best seen as occupying the office of evangelists (e.g. Col. 4:7; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2:6; Acts 14:14). No one in his right mind would claim continuance of the office of apostle (in the primary sense of the word) today. It is hazardous to claim continuance of the office of evangelist. The Presbyterian, John Murray, recognised this and said:

> "It would appear, therefore, that here is a moot question on which we are compelled to be indecisive. We should be prepared to allow for a distinct office of 'evangelist' without equating it with the specialised office to which the term is possibly applied in the three instances in which it occurs in the New Testament."[18]

With John Owen, we would claim that the office of evangelist has ceased for "where no command, no rule, no authority, no directions, are given for the calling of any officer, there that office must cease, as doth that of the apostles, who could not be called but by Jesus Christ."[19] The practice of creating an office of "minister at large" is based on flimsy ground. Not only is that the case, the ordination of such "ministers" is also based on dubious ground. We may ask, "Who ordain the man to be a minister?" The Presbyterians answer, "The office-bearers of the church universal." We ask further, "Who constitute the office-bearers of the church universal?" The Presbyterians answer, "Representatives of local churches who form the presbytery." We ask, "Whence comes the presbytery?" The Presbyterians answer, "From the pattern of church government set for us in Acts 15." We ask, "Does Acts 15 teach that there should be such a thing as a presbytery?" We shall show, in a subsequent chapter (Chapter

[18] J. Murray, Vol. 2, p. 365.

12, The Communion of Churches), the fallacy of the Presbyterians in drawing their idea of the presbytery from that portion of Scripture.

For the moment we shall pursue our Presbyterian friends from another angle. Presbyterians claim that a minister of the church universal may become the pastor of a local church by the consent or election of the church members. James Bannerman said:

> "It is true that the ministerial office is necessary to the full discharge of the duties implied in the pastoral office; and the latter is never conferred without the former, although the former may be conferred without the latter. The pastor must always be a minister, although it is not necessary that the minister should always be a pastor."[20]

When we examine all the instances of ordination mentioned in the New Testament, the individuals concerned are first elected by the people, or called of God, and then ordained to office. Ordination always follows election, and not *vice versa*. Presbyterianism is wrong in positing a situation in which a man may be ordained a minister before he is elected to be a pastor. Election and ordination are thus separated and reversed in their order. The "minister" is ordained, but not elected by the people. When elected to be the pastor of a church, his ordination would have preceded his election.

Of necessity, the meaning and purpose of ordination have to be modified in the Presbyterian system. Traditionally, ordination is the solemn setting apart of a person to church office. Since the ministerial office is separated from the pastoral office, there is no possibility of a congregation giving the minister the right to exercise the power of the ministerial office. Who then gives that right, and by what means? The Presbyterians say it is the presbytery that gives the right, through ordination. If that is the case, the purpose of ordination would now have to be adjusted to include the giving of that right! That was precisely what James Bannerman did. As far as the purpose of ordination is concerned, James Bannerman said:

> "In short, ordination by the church was the ordinary and authorised method in the apostolic practice for the in-

[19] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 448-449.
[20] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 434.

> vestiture with office of those found qualified by the previous call and special gifts conferred by Christ. Not that the ordination by the church conferred a right to the office of the ministry. That right was previously conferred by Christ; and ordination, in itself, was no more than the church's recognition of the right so conferred, *and the church's admission of the individual to the discharge of the office* to which he was thus called. The solemn act of ordination, by which they were formally admitted to the office, *or invested with the right to discharge its functions*, is not to be confounded with the previous right to the office itself, derived from a higher source; far less is it to be regarded as itself conferring that right. It is not the title to the office, but the title to the exercise of the office – not the office *in esse*, but the office *in operari* – that is bestowed by Christ through the outward call and ordination by the church."[21] (Italics added.)

> "...ordination is the solemn act of the church admitting a man to the office of the ministry, *and giving him a right and title to discharge its functions*. In all ordinary circumstances it is necessary to a man's entering on the work of the ministry lawfully; *and without it he has no authority to exercise the office*."[22] (Italics added.)

We would agree with Bannerman that ordination is the church's *recognition* of the right conferred by Christ to the discharge of the office, that ordination *formally* admits the person to office. Our quarrel with him is that he adds another purpose to ordination, namely that it is the church's *admission* of the individual to the discharge of the office, that it *invests the right* to discharge the functions of office. We would claim that the former – the recognition of the right, the formal admittance to office – is the purpose of *ordination*, while the latter – the actual admission to office, the investing of the right to discharge the functions of office – is the purpose of *election*. Bannerman had identified and confounded election with ordination, the very charge

[21] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, pp. 432-433.
[22] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, pp. 469-470.

he levelled at the Independents! "The Independent theory identifies or confounds the two things," said Bannerman.[23])

Let us be clear about the position of Bannerman. He claimed that Independents identify and confound election with ordination for the reason that they have identified and confounded the ministerial with the pastoral office. His exact words are these:

> "The fundamental error of the Independent system is the identifying or confounding of the ministerial with the pastoral office, and making the act of admission to the one the same as the act of admission to the other. With Independents the ministerial office and the pastoral office are one and the same; there can be no office of the ministry apart from the pastoral relation. ...Ordination and election are not to be separated in so far as they admit to the office of pastor or minister."[24]

Bannerman was wrong in claiming that Independents have identified and confounded election with ordination. To Independents, election is for the purpose of admitting a person into office so that he is invested with the right to exercise the functions of office, while ordination is for the purpose of formally recognising and installing him in that office. Instead of having to be on the defensive, we would turn the table around on the Presbyterians and say that they are wrong not only in creating the office of "minister at large" which is separated from the pastoral office, but also in separating ordination from election, so that one is essential to the ministerial office while the other is essential to the pastoral office. Since ordination has been separated from election, there is now a need for them to invest the minister with the right to exercise the functions of office, which they include as an *additional* purpose of ordination!

Presbyterians are also wrong in giving to ordination a meaning that is more than warranted by Scripture. Said Bannerman:

> "And in the act of investiture, or admission by the church with the laying on of hands, and prayer, we have warrant to believe that, in answer to prayer, all the promises

[23] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 469.
[24] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, pp. 459-460.

> connected with the office are fulfilled, and the special blessing or grace suited to the office will be conferred. The act of ordination itself does not, and cannot, confer the blessing as if *ex opere operato*. It is not a charm; nor does it act like a charm in the way of imparting grace. But there are special promises connected with the office of the ministry, and special grace to be warrantably expected by all who are rightly called to office; and in the act of admission to the office those promises may be claimed in faith, and those graces entreated for; and we have a right to believe that *then* and *there* the promise will be fulfilled, and the grace conferred. ...Ordination is less than a charm, but it is more than a form."[25]

One cannot help reading these words with a shudder. That there are special blessings and graces attached to the ministerial office one would not doubt. We read in Revelation 1:16 and 20, for example, that the ministers of Christ are stars in His right hand. Is this not a declaration of the truth that ministers are specially protected and loved by the Lord? One would also not doubt that God will hear the prayers uttered at the ordination. Neither would we doubt that God looks with favour upon all acts of conformity to His word, such as the laying on of hands and fasting at an ordination. Our misgiving lies in the attempt of Presbyterians to construe a meaning of ordination that is not anywhere declared in the Scripture. In proposing his view of ordination, Bannerman did not offer any proof in support of the idea that "*there* and *then* the prayer of the church will bring down the special promise and the special grace appropriate to the occasion".[26] Instead, much space is devoted to attacking the views of Independency and Episcopacy.

This is an attempt to put an aura of mysticism around that act. It is an attempt to give to ordination an efficacy that should not be there. Despite the wordy attempt to deny that it is superstition of any sort, it still smacks of the sacramentalism of Rome. One cannot help being reminded of the Lutheran view of the Lord's Supper which claims that while the elements remain what they are, the whole person of Christ – body and blood – is present *in*, *under*, and *along*

[25] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 470.
[26] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 472.

with, the elements.[27] One cannot help drawing a parallel also with the paedobaptist view of infant baptism, in which it is claimed that such baptism can bring spiritual benefit to the child who is baptised even though he is as yet incapable of exercising faith in Christ.[28] In each case, there is the introduction of something more than what is actually taught in Scripture. No, we would reject this meaning of ordination as extra-biblical!

9.3.3 In Congregationalism

When Bannerman and Witherow attacked Independency, claiming that it treats ordination as unimportant or unnecessary, they were in fact attacking the Congregationalism of their time. True, there have been Independents in the late nineteenth century, and even today, who were influenced by Congregationalism on this point, but traditional Independency as espoused by John Owen and the early Particular Baptists always upheld ordination as a necessary and biblical practice.

Like the Independents, the early Congregationalists actually believed in ordination. Isaac Watts (1674-1748), who described the beliefs of the Congregationalists of his days said:

> "First, that every church has all the power of governing itself in itself, and that everything done in the church must be by the majority of the votes of the brethren. Second, that every church has its minister *ordained* to itself, and that he cannot administer the ordinances to any other people, and if he preaches among others it is but as a gifted brother."[29] (Italics added.)

We have noted that the early General Baptists wavered between Congregationalism and Independency as far as their ecclesiology was concerned. (See Chapter 1, Introduction.) They were united, however, in upholding ordination. The Confession of 1611 actually says, in Article 21:

[27] L. Berkhof, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, p. 163.
[28] L. Berkhof, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, p. 159.
[29] D. Fountain, p. 104.

> "That these officers are to be chosen when there are persons qualified according to the rules in Christ's Testament (1 Tim. 3:2-7; Tit. 1:6-9; Acts 6:3-4). By *election and approbation* of the church or congregation whereof they are members (Acts 6:3-4; 14:23), *with fasting, prayer, and laying on of hands* (Acts 13:3; 14:23). And there being but one rule for elders, therefore but one sort of elders."[30] (Italics added.)

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 involved. Another possible reason may be their reaction to the Episcopalian sacerdotalism attached to ordination. Today, many Congregational churches treat ordination as something that is optional.[31] One error, however, does not justify another. We must return to a true understanding and proper practice of ordination.

9.4 Miscellany

Some miscellaneous practical matters related to ordination remain to be discussed. A few of these were dealt with by John Owen, which remain relevant to us today.[32] We shall deal with these matters by posing the right questions and then answering them.

1 *Should there be any difference between the ordination of a pastor and that of a ruling elder?*

The ordination of both are fundamentally the same – with the laying on of hands, prayer, and fasting. However, the ordination of a *pastor* should preferably be performed with the pastors of some like-minded churches present. This is for three reasons: the principle of *the priority of the ministry* requires that there be this slight

[30] W. L. Lumpkin, p. 122.

[31] Those who follow E. T. Hiscox would hold to this position. See E. Hiscox, pp. 361-364.

[32] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 92-96.

difference in the procedures; *the communion of churches* requires that like-minded churches be invited to share in so auspicious an occasion; and *the nature of the pastoral office*, which requires that the pastor be in constant communication with other churches and preach elsewhere often, calls for the presence of fellow ministers of the gospel. Although not absolutely necessary, these other ministers may be invited to participate in the actual ordination by the laying on of their hands.

That the ordination of the minister, in contrast to that of a ruling elder, requires the presence of other ministers is confirmed by Isaac-Watts who wrote this of the practice of Independents in his days:

> "That it is not absolutely necessary that a minister be ordained by the imposition of hands of the other ministers, but only requisite that other ministers should be there present as advisers and assistants when he is ordained by the church; that is, set apart by their choice and his acceptance."[29]

It may happen that a ruling elder of a church in time shows evidence of the gift of preaching and develops a desire to be a teaching elder. Does he need to be ordained again? The possibility of such a situation arising is known in life, as well as alluded to in Scripture. J. H. Thornwell, commenting on 1 Timothy 5:17, said:

> "From this passage, it would also appear to have been the custom in the apostolic church to select the preachers from the class of elders. Instead of making an additional order in the church, the apostles, it would seem, in the permanent arrangement of its constitution, required those who were to labour in word and in doctrine to be also strictly and properly presbyters. Hence the common distinction between teaching and ruling elders."[33]

Since the basic office for both is the same, namely that of *presbyter*, there is no need for him to be ordained again if he remains

[29] D. Fountain, p. 104.
[33] J. H. Thornwell, Vol. 4, p. 119.

in the same church. The church has to agree to support him financially as a full-time preacher, and recognise him as a pastor by conducting a special service for this purpose. Again, it would be appropriate to invite pastors from like-minded churches to be present at such a "recognition service", either to witness the proceeding, or to participate in it.

2 *Who should do the work of evangelising the heathen and church planting, and how are they to be sent on such a task?*

We have noted that the office of evangelist was extraordinary and has been withdrawn, but the functions of that office remain with us to this day. The preaching of the gospel and the planting of churches may be carried out today by pastors of churches who seek out, as well as are providentially led to, opportunities in other places. A pastor, properly ordained, may be specially set apart and sent out to preach and plant churches. He is ordained to an office *in his own church*, and sent out to do the work that in the past was done by evangelists. He may eventually be instated as a pastor in one of the churches he has planted. The early Independents did not believe that a person may be ordained to the office of a minister "for the conversion of infidels."[34] [Instead, the function of the evangelist is subsumed under the pastoral office (2 Tim. 4:5). This we have noted in an earlier chapter (Chapter 5, The Priority Of The Ministry). Said John Owen:

> "When, therefore, there are great opportunities and providential calls for the preaching of the gospel unto the conversion of souls, and, the harvest being great, there are not labourers sufficient for it, it is lawful, yea, it is the duty of pastors of particular churches to leave their constant attendance on their pastoral charge in those churches, at least for a season, to apply themselves unto the more public preaching of the word unto the conversion of the souls of men."[35]]

Apart from pastors who are ordained to office in their own churches, missionaries may be sent out to preach and plant churches. Since

[34] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 92-94.

[35] JO, Vol. 16, p. 85. This additional clarification is not in the earlier editions of this book.

they are sent out only to fulfil the *functions* of evangelists, they are not to be ordained.[36] S. Davidson, a leading Independent of the nineteenth century, expressed the view of Independency as follows:

> "Is a missionary not to be ordained before his departure from a christianized to a heathen land? Properly speaking, ordination does not apply to him. The church, however, of which he is a member, may solemnly commend him to the grace of Christ, and pray for him in a manner suitable to the circumstances of the case. A religious service of this nature is becoming and appropriate; but should not be called an ordination, because the individual is not in office, not having been elected to the pastoral duties by any people. Nor does the ceremony invest him with any official character. He is still an unofficial personage. He has no more right to preside at the ordinance of the Lord's Supper than he had before... A minister is either the minister of one church – namely, that by which he has been chosen – or else he is not a minister at all. When he ceases to be the pastor of a church, he ceases to be a minister of the gospel, till he be elected by another."[37]

In the same way, teachers who have no interest in (that is, not called to, or not qualified for) the elder's office may be appointed to regularly preach in the church without ordaining them into office. Chapter 26 paragraph 11, of the 1689 Confession of Faith stales, "Although it be incumbent on the bishops or pastors of the churches, to be instant in preaching the word, by way of office, yet the work of preaching the word is not so peculiarly confined to them but that others also gifted and fitted by the Holy Spirit for it, and approved and called by the church, may and ought to perform it." There is no mention of their ordination, unlike the case of elders and deacons, as stated in paragraph 9 of the same chapter of the Confession.

3 *May a person be ordained the pastor of more than one congregation?*

[36] See under *evangelist* in Chapter 4, Rule By Elders.
[37] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, pp. 460.

John Owen answered this question with a clear "No". The reason he gave was basically that there is no scriptural warrant for such a practice.[38] We may add that the work of the pastor in one church alone is enough to fully occupy him, if it is to be done properly, making it impossible for him to pastor over another church. Moreover, the pastoral relationship he has established with the church is unique – very much like a marriage relationship (cf. Eph. 5:31-32) – and it behoves the pastor to be faithful to his church, giving his all towards the building up of that church.

It needs to be noted, however, that every church ought to be fruitful and be multiplying itself in the planting of other churches. This is an aspect of church life which seems largely overlooked by many today. In contrast, the New Testament churches were far more mission-minded. It is not difficult to prove that there is a continuing obligation to plant churches. Just as individual believers must be fruitful, so must churches be. We are aware that the fruitfulness to be seen in believers does not consist merely in the winning of souls to Christ, but also in their own spiritual growth (Jn. 15:8; 1 Cor. 3:11-17; 2 Pet. 3:18). Soul winning must not be excluded, however. Moreover, the "Great Commission" of Matthew 28:18-20 is still binding upon the churches of Christ. The harvest is still plentiful, and labourers to do the harvesting continue to be scarce (Mt. 9:37-38). There will always be a need to send out preachers (Rom. 15; Isa. 56:8; 62:10).

The churches of the New Testament show us the correct understanding of these teachings, and set us the example to follow. A careful reading of the Bible will reveal that believers in the early churches were bearing witness to Christ spontaneously, evangelists were sent out to preach, missionaries or "apostles" were sent out to plant churches, and churches were engaged in missionary work together. Each church seemed to have its own satellite congregations. The church in Jerusalem, apart from being the "mother" of all the New Testament churches, spawned many churches in Judea and the surrounding regions (Acts 9:31; 10:1ff.; 11:1, 22, 29; 21:8; Gal. 1:22). The Corinthian church, for all its faults, had its own satellite congregations (2 Cor. 1:1). The church in Ephesus also had its satellite congregations.[39] The seven

[38] JO, Vol. 15, pp. 498-499.

churches of Asia mentioned in Revelation 1-3 probably had Ephesus as its "mother".

A church that establishes a number of satellite congregations needs to provide the necessary pastoral care to them until such time as they become independent churches. In such a situation, it is not wrong for a pastor to be exercising pastoral oversight in more than one congregation. Afterall, they are offshoots of the mother church and are therefore part of that church. Also, in the providence of God, scattered believers may begin new works which require pastoral oversight. When requested, a church may take up the responsibility of providing the needed oversight. In the process of becoming independent churches, new congregations must not be left to struggle on their own too abruptly, so that they fumble and collapse. Equally, power over these churches must not be retained for longer than necessary, such that the pastor becomes a "bishop" of the episcopal sense, who rules over many churches.

4 *May a pastor resign from one congregation and go to another?*

In principle, the pastor has a right to resign and become the pastor of another church. It is important that he guards against doing this for unworthy reasons. For example, he should not think of resigning simply to go to a bigger and more prestigious church, or to avoid problems that have arisen in the present church. As in marriage, the pastorate should be a permanent relationship between the pastor and the people. A pastor who makes it known that he is only temporary in his tenure will not inspire confidence in the people. The work of God will certainly be affected as a result.

There may be good and legitimate reasons for a man to move on to another church. It may be that he is constrained to go in order that his particular gifts would be of benefit to more people. For example, C. H. Spurgeon was mightily used of God in London after he had moved from his first pastorate at Waterbeach. The circumstances that may warrant a change of pastorate are too many for us to consider. With John Owen, we only note that in order that such removals be without offence, they must be made: (i) With the free consent of the churches concerned; and (ii) With

[39] I. L. Jensen, *Survey of the New Testament*, p. 375.

the advice of other churches, or their elders, with whom they are in fellowship.[40]

5 *May a pastor voluntarily, of his own accord, resign from office and remain in a private capacity?*

He should not think of doing so on account of failing health. An inability to function at a full capacity is different from failure to function in one's office. A man is not obliged to do more than he is able, and the church should not demand from him more than he can give. Also, the pastor should not resign simply because there are problems in the church, and he is weary of dealing with them. Every church has its fair share of problems. The pastor's job is to help the church in its problems.

John Owen listed the following circumstances which make it lawful for a pastor to resign:[41]

i When there is such an incurable decay of intellectual abilities that he is unable to discharge his pastoral duties to the edification of the church.

ii When there are incurable divisions in the church, constantly obstructing its edification, and which cannot be removed as long as the pastor continues in office, although he is not the cause of them. However, if those who cause such divisions may be cast out of the church, or if the church may withdraw fellowship from them, or if the different groups may separate to form different churches because of differences in beliefs, the pastor should not resign.

iii When the church is totally negligent, and persists in that negligence after admonition, to provide, according to their ability, for the outward necessity of their pastor and his family.

iv When all or many of these causes result in his not being able to cheerfully and comfortably, with a clear conscience, discharge his duties.

6 *May a pastor be dismissed from office by the congregation?*

[40] JO, Vol. 16, p. 95.
[41] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 95-96.

A pastor, or a ruling elder for that matter, may be considered for dismissal from office when: (i) He fails to qualify, on the basis of the qualifications required by Scripture; or, (ii) He fails to function, on the basis of the tasks required of the office by Scripture. The pastor, being a man of like nature as anyone else, may backslide and fall into grievous sins. His beliefs may change over the years so that they are at variance with those of the church. His children may become wild in their ways, though still in their minority, and bring dishonour to the gospel. When any of these happens, he has disqualified himself from office. A pastor may become old and senile. An elder may, over the years, be required to take on more and more responsibilities in his career such that his work in the church becomes severely hampered. When any of these happens, the pastor or elder has failed to function in his office. When due allowance has been given for adjustment and correction, and this has failed, the church may dismiss the man from office.

A caution is needed, however. A pastor should not be summarily dismissed without giving him due time and help to settle into a job where he can earn a reasonable income to support his family. It is a responsibilty of the church to provide for the man, at least minimally, and for a reasonable period, while he seeks another job. It would normally be difficult for him to return to his former profession, if any, after the many years' lapse. His age would put him at a great disadvantage in competing with younger men for employment. It would be cruel for the church to dismiss him without making any attempt at helping him to get settled into another job.

We may add the point that the pastor may voluntarily resign, without waiting for the church to dismiss him, when he realises that he is now disqualified from office, or that he is unable to function in his office.

9.5 Summary

1 Ordination may be understood from its characteristics, its purpose, and its meaning. The *characteristics* of ordination are as follows: it is distinct from and co-ordinate with election, it always

follows election, it is the activity of elders only, and it involves the laying on of hands and prayer. Fasting is also required when elders and ministers are ordained. Ordination carries the *meaning* of separation, dedication, or consecration of the person to God. Its *purpose* is to solemnly and publicly recognise, confirm, separate and dedicate the person in the office.

2 Ordination and election do not convey supernatural power of any kind to the ordained. Neither do they confer the offices nor the power of office to the person.

3 When there are no previously ordained elders, the assistance of pastors or elders of other churches should be sought. Although important for the proper order of the church, a defect in either election or ordination arising out of unavoidable circumstances does not disannul the call to office.

4 Independency had traditionally upheld the biblical teachings on election and ordination. Presbyterians have attacked the Independent belief on ordination by misrepresenting it and confusing it with the Congregational practice.

5 In Prelacy, ordination is perverted by the belief in "apostolic succession", in which the Holy Spirit, supernatural graces, and priestly power are conveyed *ex opere operato*.

6 In Presbyterianism, the ministerial office is separated from the pastoral office. Ordination is essential to the former, and election to the latter. Election and ordination are therefore separated. When a minister becomes a pastor, his ordination would have actually preceded his election! This would be contrary to the biblical order. It is claimed that ordination not only solemnly instals a person into office, but it also gives him the right to exercise the power of office. Furthermore, it is claimed that at ordination, *there and then*, the special blessing and grace of the ministry are conferred. All these are unwarrantable assertions that have no basis in Scripture.

7 Congregationalism had traditionally upheld the doctrines of election and ordination as in Independency. It gradually began to

downplay the importance of ordination. Today, many Congregational churches treat ordination as something optional.

Ten

RULE WITH CONSENT

We have established the truth that elders are the ones who exercise rule in the church (Chapter 4, Rule By Elders). Three other principles relating to the eldership have been established – *the priority of the ministry*, *the validity of ruling elders*, and *the unity of the eldership* (Chapters 5, 6 and 7). It remains now for us to bring these principles together and see how they bear on yet another principle of church government, namely "rule with consent". It is the consent of the congregation that is meant. This is a principle unique to Independency. It has to do with the manner by which authority is exercised in the church. By "manner" we mean more the *mechanics*, or procedures, involved in governing the church, rather than the *attitude* of the elders. The latter is important, and will enter into our discussion in passing, but our primary concern is with the mechanics of church government.

10.1 The Principle Defined

10.1.1 The nature of church-power

We begin with a summary of the nature of church-power:

i *All ecclesiastical power comes from Christ who is the head of the church.* Christ has communicated power to the churches so that each of them is complete and sufficient unto itself. In the words of the 1689 Confession, Chapter 26, paragraph 7:

> "To each of these churches thus gathered, according to His mind declared in His word, He hath given all that power and authority, which is in any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which He hath instituted for them to observe; with commands and rules for the due and right exerting, and executing of that power."

ii *This power, called "the keys of the kingdom of heaven", is actually exercised by the elders who have been chosen by the church.* Note that the power or right to govern resides originally in the church. The church uses that power in two ways – "first, in the call or choosing of officers; secondly, in their voluntary acting with them and under them in all duties of rule."[1] The ones who actually wield that power, who actually rule the church, are the elders who have been chosen by the church. Said Owen:

> "The rule of the church is, in general, the exercise of the power or authority of Jesus Christ, given unto it, according unto the laws and directions prescribed by Himself, unto its edification. This power in *actu primo*, or fundamentally, is in the church itself; in *actu secundo*, or its exercise, in them that are especially called thereunto."[2]

iii *The only law by which the elders govern the church is the law of Christ.* Again, quoting Owen, "The rule and law of the exercise of power in the elders of the church is the holy Scripture only."[3] The reason for this is that the elders are servants *of* Christ *to* the church. They are not, strictly, the servants *of* the church although the church has chosen them. Owen expressed it this way:

> "...though they are chosen and set apart to their office by the church, yet they are made overseers by the Holy Ghost (Acts 20:28). Though they have their power *by* the church, yet they have it not *from* the church; nor was that power whereof they are made partakers, as

[1] JO, Vol. 16, p. 40.
[2] JO, Vol. 16, p. 31.

> was said, formally resident in the body of the church, before the participation of it, but *really* in Christ alone, and *morally* in His word or law. And thence is the rule and guidance of the church committed unto them by Christ (Heb. 13:7, 17; 1 Pet. 5:2; 1 Tim. 3:5)."[4]

iv *Church-power is wielded by the elders for the ultimate purpose of edifying the church.* Said Owen: "The sole end of the ministerial exercise of this power and rule, by virtue thereof, unto the church, is the edification of itself (Rom. 15:1-3; 2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10; Eph. 4:14-15)."[5]

10.1.2 The manner of ruling

With this understanding of the nature of church power, we are ready to answer the question, "How, in practice, do the elders exercise rule over the church?" Two considerations lead us directly to the answer.

First, there is the relation between the elders and the church members, *vis-a-vis* church-power. The church has chosen elders to rule over them. The church voluntarily agrees to act "with them and under them in all duties of rule". Using Owen's words further, "1. All authority in the church is committed by Christ unto the officers or rulers of it, as unto all acts and duties whereunto office-power is required; and, 2. Every individual person hath the liberty of his own judgment as unto his own consent or dissent in what he is himself concerned."[6]

Secondly, there are the two "keys of the kingdom of heaven" that are placed in the hands of the elders to use. The first key is the power of teaching – the preaching and application of the word directly to the conscience and life of the members. The second key is the exercise of judicial power – the making of decisions, the drawing up of rules, for the church with respect to its discipline, worship, and government. These two "keys" are seen in the division of labours between the two sorts of elders – the task of teaching, and the task

[3] JO, Vol. 16, p. 135.
[4] JO, Vol. 15, p. 501.
[5] JO, Vol. 16, p. 31.
[6] JO, Vol. 16, p. 40.

of ruling. The pastors both teach and rule, while the ruling elders only rule.

We quote John Owen on the two sorts of church-power:

> "...authority to teach and administer the sacraments, which is commonly called the power of *order*; and also ruling, which is called a power of *jurisdiction*, corruptly..."[7]
>
> "Church-power, acted in its rule, is called "The keys of the kingdom of heaven", by an expression derived from the keys that were a sign of office-power in the families of the kings (Isa. 22:22); and it is used by our Saviour himself to denote the communication of church-power unto others, which is absolutely and universally vested in Himself, under the name of "The key of David" (Rev 3:7; Mt. 16:19)."
>
> "These keys are usually referred under two heads: namely, the one of *order*, the other of *jurisdiction*."
>
> "By the 'key of order', *the spiritual right, power, and authority of bishops* or pastors to preach the word, to administer the sacraments, and doctrinally to bind and loose the consciences of men, are intended."
>
> "By 'jurisdiction', *the rule, government, or discipline of the church* is designed; though it was never so called or esteemed in Scripture, or the primitive church until the whole nature of church rule or discipline was depraved and changed. ...that these keys do include the twofold distinct powers of teaching and rule, of doctrine and discipline, is freely granted."[8]

The above two considerations now dovetail to the following conclusions:

i Rule is exercised through the pastor preaching publicly from the pulpit, and the elders applying the word of God in private admonition, to the members of the church. The members are to

[7] JO, Vol. 16, p. 42.
[8] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 106-107.

weigh up what is heard, and to humbly submit to such teaching and admonition, as long as the Scripture has been faithfully expounded and applied. A church member may not like what he hears. He might be uncomfortable when the preached word applies to him. He may even resent the admonition of an elder. But listen he must, for the pastor and elders are carrying out the duties entrusted to them by the head of the church, Jesus Christ. It is *His* word that is being expounded and applied. The application is to his personal, spiritual life. Here, the first key of the kingdom of heaven is wielded.

ii Rule is exercised when the eldership brings a decision pertaining to the welfare of the church to the membership for its consideration. The members, after weighing up the decision of the eldership, give their consent or otherwise. Note that it is a *decision* that is brought to the congregation, and it is the *consent* of the congregation that is sought by the eldership. The congregation does not make the decision for the elders to consent, but *vice versa*. The word of God is applied, but this time to the external circumstances and to the whole church. Here, the second key of the kingdom of heaven is wielded.

Note also that in both cases, the congregation is actively involved. The elders exercise rule, while the congregation gives its consent. In the first case, the congregational consent is implicit. The congregation has already agreed to enter into the pastor-flock relationship by the election and ordination of the pastor. The pastor is now teaching *by* the consent of the flock. But he continues to need the implicit consent of the flock as he continues teaching. The right of judgment of the members is not suspended at any point subsequent to the pastors election and ordination. The pastor now teaches *with* the consent of the people. Now, the consent is *implicit*. By that is meant that the pastor does not have to seek the consent of the congregation by a show of hands everytime he wishes to preach. An elder does not have to ask for the consent of the member before he begins admonishing him. The consent lies in the church members listening willingly to the preaching or admonition, and heeding to whatever is right and good. In the second case, the consent is *explicit*. The elders seek the consent of the congregation, normally

by a show of hands, before a decision pertaining to the welfare of the church is adopted and executed.

The principle of "rule with consent" may thus be defined as the practice whereby the elders seek the consent (or concurrence, or agreement) of the congregation as they exercise rule over the church. The consent is given implicitly in the case of the direct application of the word of God to the personal and spiritual life of the church members, in public preaching and private admonition. It is given explicitly, often by a show of hands, in the decisions that affect the external circumstances of the whole church.

10.2 The Principle Proved

We have taken pains to develop and define the principle of "rule with congregational consent". It would be necessary now to provide categorical proofs for this principle. The proofs are similar to those given by John Owen in support of the principle of "popular election".[9]

10.2.1 From the nature of the church

The church is a voluntary society. We will have occasion to develop this truth in the next chapter (Chapter 11, The Gathered Church). Suffice to say for the moment that the church is made up of believers who have freely, without any coercion, joined together by covenant to worship and serve God in accordance to His law: "...they... first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God (2 Cor. 8:5)."

The church begins as a voluntary society. It also continues on as a voluntary society. A member should never allow his conscience to be bound by any law other than that of Christ. The "liberty of conscience" is a principle valued by all evangelical Christians, although it has been differently understood. Baptists have been the most consistent in upholding this principle, and many of them have shed blood for it. This principle does not apply only to the people in society, but also to Christians in the church. This is consistent with the truth that the church is a voluntary society. That being so, it would be expected that the church members must give their con-

[9] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 63-68.

sent to the rule exercised by the elders. The members must continue to have the right of judgment, to weigh up what is heard from the pulpit, or is decided upon by the elders.

10.2.2 From the nature of church-power

From our understanding of the nature of church-power has arisen the principle of "rule with congregational consent". All this was discussed above. It would have been sufficient for us to merely state the principle there, and then offer here the arguments arising from the nature of the church as proof. Be that as it may, we note that the calling of elders is an act of "the power of the keys" *of the church*. Although the Lord was speaking to Peter in Matthew 16:13-20, the keys of the kingdom of heaven was given to the church as a whole. This is because Peter was the spokesman among the disciples. That the keys were given not just to Peter but to all the apostles is clear from the fact that the "binding and loosing" spoken of in Matthew 16:19 is again mentioned in Matthew 18:18, when Christ was addressing all the apostles. The apostles together were the church "in embryo". In other words, "the keys" were actually given to the church. John Owen held to the same view on this matter.[10]

The church does not cease to possess the church power granted it by Christ the moment elders are appointed. The eldership is not like a robot that, once created and let loose, begins to reign supreme over the people who first invented it. The elders have been given the authority to exercise the church-power, but that church-power continues to reside in the church. That being the case, it is to be expected that the congregation would continue to have a part to play in the government of the church. This is not to say that the elders share their *office-power* with the congregation. The elders do actually rule, but they rule in such a way that the consent of the congregation is involved. The consent of the congregation is one thing, and the governing power of the elders another. The two different things act in co-ordination with each other. That is the genius of New Testament church government!

[10] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 63-64.

10.2.3 From apostolic examples

In Chapter 8 (Popular Election), we have shown that two elements are involved in the appointment of elders and deacons: (i) the guidance of the existing elders, and (ii) the consent of the congregation. Three passages of Scripture were referred to: Acts 1:15-26, Acts 6:1-7, and Acts 14:21-23. Does *congregational consent* apply only to the appointment of elders and deacons? Or is it needed also in all other decisions in the church? The clear teaching of Scripture is that it is needed also in all other decisions. Take the incident recorded for us in Acts 15. We read:

> Acts 15:6, "So *the apostles and elders* came together to consider this matter."
>
> Acts 16:4, "And as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by *the apostles and elders* at Jerusalem."

These verses show that the apostles and elders were the ones who made the decisions. They were the ones who exercised rule. Yet, they did not force their conclusions upon the church members. We read in Acts 15:12 that "the multitude" of the congregation was present. We further read:

> Acts 15:22, 23 and 25, "Then it pleased the apostles and elders, *and the whole church*, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. They wrote this letter to them: The apostles, the elders, *and the brethren*, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia,... ...it seemed good *to us, being assembled with one accord*, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul,..."

Clearly, the consent of the congregation had been obtained before the decree was sent out to the Gentile churches. Here, then, is an example in which a dispute over doctrine and its applications was settled by the guidance of the elders but with congregational consent.

The sending out of the delegates, in the first place, from the church of Antioch to Jerusalem to settle this dispute must be seen in the same light. We read:

> Acts 15:1-3, "And certain men came down from Judea and taught *the brethren*, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, *they determined* that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. So, *being sent on their way by the church*, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria,"

Who determined to send Paul, Barnabas and certain others to Jerusalem? It was "the brethren", or "the church", not just the elders of the church. Congregational consent was involved. Other examples are as follows:

> 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, *when you are gathered together*, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan..."
>
> 1 Corinthians 16:3, "And when I come, *whomever you approve* by your letters, I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem."
>
> 2 Corinthians 8:19, "...who was also *chosen by the churches* to travel with us..."

We see, then, that the congregations were actually involved in decisions such as the sending of delegates to settle a dispute, the settlement of the dispute itself, the sending of delegates to deliver a decree, the sending of a representative to deliver a gift, and the exercise of church discipline. These instances, together with those relating to the appointment of elders and deacons, conclusively prove the principle of "rule with congregational consent".

10.3 The Principle Applied

This would be the appropriate place to lay down the duties of the elders and deacons, and the duties of the members toward the elders, so that the present work on church government may be more complete. It has been our deliberate policy to quote John Owen in support of the Independent view of church government. We shall now follow Owen in his delineation of the duties of the elders, the deacons and the members before considering how the elders, in practice, rule the church.

10.3.1 Duties of the eldership

The duties of the elders, considered corporately as *the eldership*, may be classed under three points:[11]

1 *The admission and exclusion of members.* Both these are acts of church power and authority, which are to be exercised by the elders, with the consent of the congregation.

2 *The guidance of the members, toward the observance of the rule and law of Christ*, for His glory, and to their own edification. These things may be classed under four points:

   i Mutual, intense, special love among themselves, to be exercised continually.

   ii Personal holiness, shown by obedience to the moral laws of God.

   iii Usefulness towards the members of the same church, towards other churches, and all men, as occasion and opportunity require.

   iv The performance of all those duties which all the members owe to one another by virtue of their respective standing within the body of Christ.

3 *The management of the outward affairs of the church in its meetings*, so that "all things be done decently and in order".

The pastor and ruling elders have their own roles, respectively, in fulfilling these duties.

[11] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 136-137.

10.3.2 Duties of the pastor

The duties of the pastor include the following:[12]

1 *To feed the flock by diligent preaching of the word.* For this to be done effectively, there must be:

   i Spiritual wisdom and understanding in the mysteries of the gospel, that he may declare unto the church "the whole counsel of God" and "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Acts 20:27; 1 Cor. 2-4-7; Eph. 3:8-11).

   ii Experience of the power of the truth which he preaches in and upon his own soul. Without this he will be lifeless and heartless in his work, and his labour will largely be unprofitable towards others.

   iii Skill to divide the word aright (2 Tim. 2:15). This consists in careful study of the word so as to apply to the souls of the hearers.

   iv A wise and diligent consideration of the state of the flock, as regards their strengths and weaknesses, their growth or defect in knowledge, their temptations and duties, their spiritual decays or progress. This must be done not only in a general way, but, as much as possible, with respect to all the individual members of the church.

   v All these are to be done with zeal for the glory of God and love for the souls of men.

2 *Continual fervent prayer for the flock.* Acts 6:4 says, "We will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word." Without this, no man can preach as he ought, nor perform any other duty of his pastoral office. Some areas that need to be prayed for include:

   i The success of the word, that it might be a blessing to the hearers.

   ii The temptations that the church is generally exposed to. This varies with outward circumstances – times of peace or persecution; times of material prosperity or adversity, etc.

[12] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 74-89.

iii The particular state and condition of all the members.

iv The presence of Christ, by His Spirit, in the meetings of the church.

v The preservation of the church members in faith, love, and fruitfulness, with all the accompanying duties.

3 *The administration of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper.* With regard to the latter, attention has to be given to:

i The time, place, frequency, order, and propriety of the ordinance so that as many as possible of the church members may be able to benefit.

ii The manner of conducting the ordinance, that it should be in accordance with Scripture. There is always the danger of gradually introducing uninstituted rites and ceremonies.

iii The people who partake in this ordinance must be those permitted by the rules of the gospel.

4 *To preserve the truth or doctrine of the gospel, and to defend it against all opposition* (1 Tim. 1:3, 4; 4:6, 7, 16; 4:20; 2 Tim. 1:14; 2:25; 3:14-17; Acts 20:28-31). For this to be done effectively, there should be present the following:

i A clear, sound, comprehensive knowledge of the entire doctrine of the gospel.

ii Love of the truth which has been learned and understood.

iii To be fearfully careful not to entertain or encourage novel opinions with regard to doctrine.

iv Knowledge, and sharpness of mind, to discern and counter the attacks that come from enemies of the truth.

v Strengthening the people in the fundamentals of the gospel so that they are not easily shaken and led astray.

vi A diligent watch over the flock against false teachers from without, or the rise of error from within the church.

vii Standing together with the elders and messengers of other associated churches in the declaration of the faith which is professed in common.

5 *To labour for the conversion of souls unto God.* The pastor's responsibility is primarily to his church. Normally, he should not travel about preaching for the conversion of strangers and neglect his own church. He labours for the conversion of souls under the following circumstances:

i When unconverted people come to the meetings of the church.

ii When he occasionally preaches in other places when called upon.

iii When there are great opportunities and providential calls, the harvest being great and the labourers few, it is not only lawful, it is a duty of the pastor to leave his pastoral charge, at least for a season, to concentrate on the more public preaching of the word unto the conversion of souls.

6 *To be ready, willing, and able, to comfort, relieve, and refresh, those who are tempted, tossed, wearied with fears and sorrow, in times of trial and desertion.* Today, this would be called "counselling". This requires the following:

i The ability to rightly understand the various cases that might occur. Books are helpful to develop this faculty, but they are no replacement for the diligent study of Scripture, meditation on the word read, fervent prayer, experience of spiritual things and temptations in one's own soul, and a wise observation of the manner of God's dealings with others, and the ways of opposition made to the work of His grace in them.

ii A readiness and willingness to attend to the special cases that may be brought to the pastor. These must not be looked upon as unnecessary diversions.

iii Bearing patiently and tenderly with the weakness, ignorance, dullness, slowness to believe and be satisfied, even insolence, in those who are so tempted.

7 *Sharing with all the members of the church in their trials and troubles, whether internal or external.* The same spirit, and the same mind, as those of the Saviour in His compassion towards His people, ought to be found in the pastor. Said the apostle in 2 Corinthians 11:29, "Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I do not burn with indignation?"

8 *Care of the poor and visitation of the sick.*

9 *Responsibility over the rule of the church* lies chiefly with the pastor. This is the second general division of the power and duty of the office, the first being the ministry of the word (1 Tim. 5:17).

10 *Responsibility over the communion of churches*, towards their edification, lies chiefly with the pastor.

11 *A humble, holy exemplary life*, in all godliness and honesty is essential. Without this, all the other duties will neither be useful to men, nor acceptable to the Chief Shepherd, Christ Jesus.

10.3.3 Duties of the ruling elders

The duties of the ruling elders include the following:[13]

1 Together with the teaching elders, they exercise rule over the church as a body – the eldership.

2 They, in particular, attend to the things that pertain to the rule or discipline of the church. Church-rule is concerned with ensuring that the laws, commands, and teachings of Christ are observed. Towards this end, some of the duties involved include the following:

   i *To watch diligently over the life of all the members of the church*, to see that they are blameless, without offence, useful, exemplary, and consistent with the holiness of the commands of Christ, the honour of the gospel, and their profession of faith. Upon such observation, the elders are to instruct, admonish, charge, exhort, encourage, comfort, as they see fit.

   ii *To watch against all causes and causers of differences and divisions.* The church members are under obligation to observe Christ's "new commandment" – to love one another. Differences must not be allowed to disrupt the peace of the church, or divide the body of Christ.

   iii *To exhort, encourage, and admonish church members in their church duties, as occasions require.* Every member has been

[13] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 138-141.

given gifts which are to be exercised to the edification of the church. In particular, they are to be reminded of their duty to contribute towards the needs of the poor and other gospel work.

iv *To watch against the beginnings of any church disorders*, such as those that infested the church of Corinth, or failure to attend the meetings of the church (Heb. 10:25).

v *To visit the sick, the poor, the afflicted, and those imprisoned for their faith.*

vi *To consult with, and give guidance to, the deacons of the church in the discharge of their duties.*

vii *To receive from other churches gifts for the poor and needy*, as during persecution, famine, or other disasters. These gifts are to be disposed by the deacons according to the advice of the elders of the church (Acts 11:30).

viii *To acquaint the pastors with the state of the flock.* The pastors, by their attention to the word and prayer, would not be able to know the state of all the members of the church well. It is the duty of the ruling elders to keep the pastors informed of this.

ix *To meet and consult with the pastors about things of importance that are to be proposed unto the church, for its consent.*

x *To take care of the legitimate liberties of the church*, that they be not imposed on by any Diotrephes, whether in office or without it.

xi *To consult together with all the other elders, in times of difficulties and persecution*, concerning all those things that need to be done for preservation from violence, and in accordance with the will of Christ.

xii *To preserve the church in peace and unity in the event that the pastor dies or is removed.* This applies to the situation most often encountered, in which there is only one pastor, for few are the churches that are blessed with more than one pastor. The elders are to ensure that the meetings of the church continue, and prevent irregularities in any persons or parties. They are to initiate, direct and guide the church in the call and choice of some other suitable person or persons to replace the deceased or removed.

10.3.4 Duties of the deacons

The deacons do not have power to rule the church. Strictly speaking, their duties do not fall within the domain of the government of the church. Nevertheless, for completeness, we include a brief delineation of their duties, *vis-a-vis* the elders. It would be best to quote John Owen directly:

> "Whereas the care of the whole church, in all its concernments, is principally committed unto the pastors, teachers, and ruling elders, it is the duty of the deacons, in the discharge of their office:
>
> 1. To acquaint them from time to time with the state of the church, and especially of the poor, so far as it falls under their inspection.
> 2. To seek and take their advice in matters of greater importance relating unto their office.
> 3. To be assisting unto them in all the outward concerns of the church."[14]

10.3.5 Duties of the church members

Here, we do not wish to consider the general duties of the church, and the members.[15] We wish only to list down the duties of the members *towards the elders*. Following Owen, we have the following:[16]

1 To hold them in reverence and honour for their office and work's sake (1 Thess. 5:12, 13; 1 Tim. 5:17).

2 To obey them conscientiously in all things that they speak to them about in the name of the Lord (Heb. 13:17; 1 Cor. 16:16).

3 To pray earnestly for them, that they may fulfil the work of the ministry, and to exhort them in this if necessary (Eph. 4:18, 19; Col. 4:3, 17; 2 Thess. 3:1).

[14] JO, Vol. 16, p. 151.
[15] For these, see JO, Vol. 15, pp. 508-510.
[16] JO, Vol. 15, p. 502.

4 To supply them their temporal needs, for their comfortable subsistence in the world and usefulness to others (Gal. 6:6; 1 Cor. 9:14).

5 Wisely to carry out things under their direction, so that they may be among them without fear (1 Cor. 16:10).

6 To remain with and stand by them in their sufferings for the gospel, and service of Christ among them (2 Tim. 1:16-18; 4:16).

Obviously, some of the above-mentioned duties are more applicable with respect to the pastors than to the ruling elders. The supply of their temporal needs (point number 4) is spelt out also in the 1689 Confession of Faith (Chapter 26, paragraph 10):

> "...it is incumbent on the churches to whom they minister, not only to give them their due respect, but also to communicate to them of all their good things, according to their ability, so as they may have a comfortable supply, without being themselves entangled in secular affairs; and may also be capable of exercising hospitality towards others..."

10.3.6 The office-bearers' meetings

The deacons may meet together regularly to discuss the matters pertaining to their office. One of them would be assigned to be the chairman of all such meetings. Such a one is not holding a different office, whether of "arch-deacon" or "head-deacon". He is not superior to the other deacons in authority or office-power. He is merely appointed to perform *a task* so that all things may be done "decently and in order". Some churches find it more helpful to assign an elder to superintend the deacons' meetings.

The deacons would meet with the elders often. The elders would meet by themselves often. In all such meetings, the pastor should normally be the chairman. If there are more than one pastors in the church, one of them who has been recognised and approved by the church as the leading elder would be the chairman. This is to be so by virtue of the principle of "the priority of the ministry".

The pastor, being one who is called of God, gifted of Christ, and recognised and set apart to the ministry full-time by the church, naturally spends more time in the study of the word and in prayer. He interacts with every member of the church, is sought for counsel by most members of the church, and is confided to by those who seek his counsel. He is responsible for communicating with the representatives of other churches in the association of churches. He entertains and offers hospitality to visiting preachers. He reads more of Christian literature, and is more up-to-date and more knowledgeable about the overall situation concerning the wider church of Christ. Among all the elders, he should be the one most suited to lead the office-bearers' meeting.

In a meeting, he would put forward his proposal or decision with regard to any issue affecting the church, to the other elders. He explains to them why "possibility A" should be adopted and why "possibility B" should be rejected. He then asks for questions, comments or suggestions from the other church-officers. Once the questions have been answered, the comments heard, and the suggestions considered, he calls upon the meeting to give its consent to adopt "possibility A". The church officers normally give their consent by a show of hands. In the case of a weighty matter, a secret ballot may be taken. When a majority-decision is obtained – and under normal circumstances it will be obtained – "possibility A" becomes the decision of the eldership which will be brought to the congregation for its consent.

The other officers who have not personally agreed to the decision must now abide by the decision of the majority. None of them may say at the congregational meeting later that he had not agreed to the decision. The decision was made collectively. It is now the decision of *the eldership*. The principle of "the unity of the eldership" is thus put in operation.

What if there is no clear majority? This might conceivably occur in exceptional situations when there are strong opinions held with regard to some important matters. In such a situation, it is best not to bring any decision to the congregation yet. More time, and more meetings would be needed to discuss the matter. If needed, the elders might wish to spend time praying and fasting over the matter, and at an appointed meeting, come together again to deal with it. The principle to be observed is that no decision should be brought

before the congregation for its consent when there is no unanimity within the eldership over the matter. John Owen's remark on this is as follows:

> "...nothing crude or indigested, nothing unsuited to the sense and duty of the church, will at any time be proposed therein, so as to give occasion unto contests or janglings, disputes contrary unto order or decency, but all things may be preserved in a due regard unto the gravity and authority of the rulers."[17]

The manner of conducting the office-bearers' meeting described above is similar to the manner by which consent from the congregation is obtained, which we shall discuss below. This is not to say that none of the elders, apart from the pastor, may initiate a suggestion or propose an item for the agenda of the meeting. All we are saying is that the leadership of the pastor should be recognised in practice. When there are few elders, say, five in number, it might conceivably be possible for the meetings to be more free – with each elder proposing and counter-proposing – and to finally come to a consensus. But what is going to happen when the eldership is bigger, as was the case with C. H. Spurgeon's church, in which were about twenty-five elders?[18] The *eldership* in Spurgeon's church was alone as big as many modern-day *churches*! If the leadership of the pastor is not recognised, the elders' meeting is likely to turn chaotic, as often happens in business meetings of those churches of the Congregational persuasion.

10.3.7 The church business meeting

The elders should call for meetings of the church members often to discuss matters pertaining to the life of the church. These meetings are meant for members only. The chairman of the meeting should normally be the pastor. Since it is a meeting to discuss matters concerning the Lord's work, it should begin and close with prayer. For each item on the agenda, the decision of the eldership is brought to the congregation. As in the office-bearers' meeting, the reasons for

[17] JO, Vol. 16, p. 141.
[18] C. H. Spurgeon, Vol. 2, p. 75.

adopting "possibility A" and rejecting "possibilty B" are given. The congregation is invited lo comment or ask questions, if any. In some matters, suggestions may be requested from the congregation. After the comments have been made and taken note of as necessary, and the questions answered, the congregation is requested to agree to adopt "possibility A" by a show of hands.

Under normal circumstances, the congregation has a duty to give its consent. The government of the church cannot function properly without the congregation being involved in this way. Failure on the part of a member to raise his hand would have to be taken as disagreement with the proposal of the elders. It is not possible to "abstain from voting" or to remain "neutral". The congregation had been specifically requested to give its consent to adopt "possibilty A". It had not been asked to decide which one of the two, or more, possibilities to adopt.

What is to be done in the exceptional situations when the congregation refuses to give its consent, when the decisions of the elders are for the good of the church and according to the law of Christ? John Owen answered:

> 1 Diligently to instruct them from the word in their duty, making known the mind of Christ unto them in the matter under consideration.
>
> 2 To declare unto them the danger of their dissent in obstructing the edification of the body, to the dishonour of the Lord Christ and their own spiritual disadvantage.
>
> 3 To wait patiently for the concurrence of the grace of God with their ministry in giving light and obedience unto the church.
>
> 4 In case of the church's continuance in any failure of duty, to seek for advice and counsel from the elders and brethren of other churches.[19]

We recapitulate on how the various relevant principles of church government have been brought to bear on the life of the church in practical ways. The principle of "rule by eiders" has been put in

[19] JO, Vol. 15, p. 502.

operation since the elders were the ones who made the decisions, and they were the ones who led the congregation to concurrence. The principle of "rule with congregational consent" operated when the congregation gave its consent under the guidance of the elders. The principle of "the priority of the ministry" was recognised in that the pastor led the elders in the decision-making process, and chaired the church business meeting. The manifold duties of the eldership show to us that it is valid – yea, even desirable and necessary – to have ruling elders. John Owen pleaded for the principle of the "validity of ruling elders", although he did not call it by that name, in the following way:

> "It is vain apprehension, to suppose that one or two teaching officers in a church... ...should be able to take care of, and attend with diligence unto, those things that do evidently belong unto the rule of the church."[20]

The principle of "the unity of the eldership" was seen in operation when the elders came to unanimity of decision before the church business meeting. It was seen in operation when they presented their unanimous decisions to the congregation for its consent.

This principle should also be seen in operation in the everyday life of the church. The ruling elders, in particular, must constantly be on the guard against the unwitting disruption of the unity of the eldership by unwise words or actions. The pastor, by virtue of his special duty of preaching in public, is prone to misunderstanding and attack from the hearers. This is his "occupational hazard". He has to proclaim the truth in love, bearing in mind the end of edifying the hearers. He has also to be faithful and fearless in proclaiming even unpalatable truths, bearing in mind the end of glorifying God. As such, sinners who do not like what they hear often turn their wrath against the preacher instead of taking what they have heard as the word of God to them. An elder who handles a complaint or criticism against the pastor unwisely is likely to undermine his ministry and create possible division in the church. Lawrence Eyres made the same point, saying:

> "There is need at this point to sound a serious warning. It sometimes happens that members of the congregation

[20] JO, Vol. 16, p. 142.

> will come to one or more of the elders, expressing feelings of resentment or disapproval of the pastor's preaching or of his ministry in general. This is not wrong in itself. Some pastors appear rather unapproachable to those who sit in the pews. Still, everything depends on how the elders handle such expressions of concern.
>
> If an elder readily agrees with the complaints, the word will get around and he will soon become the rally-point for dissension and division. He must shun this role! If the criticisms are trivial, he should deal with them from the position of solidarity with the pastor. If he cannot resolve the problems, it becomes his duty to bring the dissidents and the pastor together in a prayerful effort to heal what would otherwise become a breach in the peace of the church. In fact, procedures to deal with such possibilities ought to be worked out in the session and agreed upon *before* troubles of this sort surface! In short, elders are to be healers, not inflicters, of wounds in the body of Christ."[21]

Just as it is possible for ruling elders to breach the principle of "the unity of the eldership", it is possible for the pastor to do the same. When genuine concerns are brought to the pastor by the elders, he should pay close attention to them without getting upset and treating the matter as a personal attack. Failure to heed the warnings and suggestions of truly godly elders has been the cause of the alienation of many a pastor from their congregations. When the pastor is finally dismissed, or is forced to resign from office, it is all too easy for the blame to be put upon the elders. In reality, it is the inability of the pastor to take criticisms of his ministry, and his intransigence in the whole process, that has led to his predicament, and that of the church. Remembering the principle of "the unity of the eldership" would have helped in such situations.

The likelihood of one or two elders agitating for power and influence, thereby undermining the ministry, is greater in the *Absolute Equality View* of the eldership. The likelihood of a pastor not heeding the advice of the elders over genuine grievances is greater in the

[21] L. R. Eyres, p. 17. Eyres holds to the *Absolute Equality* view of eldership, but in a Presbyterian setting in which the regular preacher is "the minister".

Presbyterian View of the eldership. The *Independent View* of the eldership, however, must not be seen as immune to both these dangers. As long as men are in this fallen world, clothed in their fallen, albeit regenerate, nature, they are prone to pride, weaknesses, and sins. One and all, whether pastors or ruling elders, and even other members of the church, need to remember that the ways of the kingdom of God are different from the ways of the world.

> "You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Mk. 10:42-45)."

10.4 The Principle Disputed

10.4.1 In Independency

The early Particular Baptists consistently upheld the principle of "rule with congregational consent" just as the paedobaptist Independents did.

In the appointment of church-officers, the 1689 Confession of Faith mentions, in Chapter 26, paragraph 9, that the appointment of a bishop or elder to office is "by common suffrage of the church itself". Similarly, a deacon is to be chosen "by the like suffrage". *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* shows that the original meaning of the word "suffrage", as used from the sixteenth century, was: "A vote given by a member of a body, state, or society, in assent to a proposition or in favour of the election of a person; in the extended sense, a vote for or against any controverted question or nomination." Clearly, in the matter of the appointment of office-bearers, the Particular Baptists believed in the necessity of congregational consent.

To the Particular Baptists, the necessity of congregational consent extended to all other matters of church-rule. Congregational consent is necessary for the appointment of the chief officers of the church,

namely the elders. It is necessary for the appointment of the lesser officers, namely the deacons. It should come as no surprise to us that consent is also needed in other lesser matters in the church, as is taught in Scripture. The Particular Baptists saw this, and acted accordingly. Isaac Watts (1674-1748) wrote:

> "In church government they (that is, the Particular Baptists) are Independents. ...the generality of Independents follow rather Dr. Owen's notion; their tenets are such as these: 1st. That the power of church government resides in the pastors and elders of every particular church, and 2nd. That it is the duty of the people to consent."[22]

Clear as the position of Independency is, it has come under much misrepresentation and attack, notably by the Presbyterians. As has been repeatedly shown, this is partly due to their confusion of Independency with Congregationalism, whether deliberate or otherwise. If the position of Independency can be cogently argued from the Scripture, the position of Presbyterianism necessarily needs to be re-examined. The Bible has not taught two different systems that are both correct at the same time. Understandably, but inexcusably, the Presbyterians have sought to tear down Independency by the most reprehensible tactics.

When J. B. Morellius first propounded the view that power over all ecclesiastical matters – whether decisions about points of doctrine, or the election and deposition of ministers, excommunication or re-admission of church members, or lay preaching – resides with the congregation, he was roundly condemned by the Reformed Church of France, which was Presbyterian.[23] The Presbyterians held, and continue to hold, to the view that only the power to elect pastors lies with the congregation, while all other matters are to be decided by the elders. Since the time of Morellius, Presbyterians have been quick to jump upon the slightest advocation of Independency. James Bannerman, for example, attacked Independency with these words:

> "The authority which the office-bearers, upon such a system, can wield over the members must be very limited

[22] D. Fountain, p. 104.

[23] W. Cunningham, *Discussions on Church Principles*, p. 372.

> indeed, being from the very nature of the system an authority exercised by the rulers in conjunction with, and by the permission and consent of, the ruled. An authority so conditioned and checked by the necessity of the consent of the parties over whom it is exercised, cannot, in the proper sense of the word, be authority at all. It is advice, or it is counsel, administered by one party to another; but it cannot be authoritative power, exercised by one party over another, when the concurrence of both is required before it can be exercised at all, and when either party may refuse that concurrence at their pleasure."[24]

Bannerman had a two-fold problem here – he had a *preconceived idea* of the *manner* of ruling, which he confounded with the *authority* of ruling. He had the preconceived idea that the elders must rule according to the Presbyterian principle of "representation" in which the elders, once elected, rule without the necessity of further reference to the congregation since they act as its "representatives". This Presbyterian idea of representation is used as a yardstick to measure the correctness, or otherwise, of other systems. An appeal is made to the manner by which political systems operate. The Independent system is lumped together with the Congregational system. "Such *views*" (note the plural), it is claimed, "if fairly carried out, are inconsistent with the nature of every orderly and well-regulated society."[25]

Bannerman ought to have known better than to use political systems as the model for the government of the church. This is like some people in our days who would use archaelogical findings to prove or disprove the correctness of biblical teaching. We know, however, that the conclusions of archaeology or science are never absolute. As new facts or findings come to light, the conclusions are adjusted accordingly. The Bible is alone our authority in all matters of faith and practice. We may use political systems to *illustrate* a biblical point. Or, at the most, we may use them to *support* a biblical truth. We may never use any of them as a *model* to erect an ecclesiastical system. Bannerman's argument from political systems does

[24] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, pp. 238-240.
[25] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 243.

not disprove the correctness of the Independent principle of "rule with congregational consent".

Bannerman's next shot made use of a number of passages from the Bible as ammunition He said, "In the second place, such views are incompatible with the many and explicit statements of Scripture in regard to the nature and extent of church-power."[26] However, on examination, these statements of Scripture do not support Bannerman's contention.

Firstly, he claimed that "the names or designations given to the parties ruling the church, in the strongest manner demonstrate that their office and power were in the strict sense of the term authoritative, and are incompatible with the limitation implied in the Independent theory." These names and designations include "bishops", "presbyters", "rulers", and "pastors". That these terms demonstrate that their office and power are authoritative no one will dispute. Independency gives to this fact its due recognition by upholding the principle of "rule by elders". However, this fact does not in any way show that the principle of "rule with congregational consent" is wrong. Bannerman had confused the *authority* to rule with the *manner* of rule.

Secondly, it is claimed that "the precepts or instructions given to the rulers of the church, in regard to the discharge of the duties of their office, are at variance with the Independent view of church power."[27] But how do such terms as "teach", "exhort", "beseech", "reprove" and "rebuke", as addressed to elders, and raised by Bannerman, show that the principle of "rule with congregational consent" is wrong? These words have to do with the "key of order" and not the "key of jurisdiction". Bannerman had begun his refutation of the Independent system by focusing on "that particular department of its exercise which has reference to government and discipline".[28] He had, in fact, singled out the "key of jurisdiction" in the Independent system to attack. Why should he now be raising an argument that has to do with the "key of order"? Clearly, he was erecting a strawman to shoot at!

The third family of texts used by Bannerman is again irrelevant.

[26] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 244.
[27] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 245.
[28] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 239.

The words "obey" and "submit" in Hebrews 13:17 and 1 Corinthians 16:16, addressed to church members, actually answer to the previous scriptures that were addressed to the elders. These verses prove that the elders do have the authority to rule, but they do not indicate the *manner* by which rule is to be exercised. The principle of "rule with congregational consent" stands intact.

The fourth family of texts used by Bannerman is even farther off the mark. He claimed, "We have instances and descriptions of the power – *exousia* – so to be administered by the rulers and so to be obeyed by the members of the church, such as to leave no doubt that it was judicial and authoritative"[29] What are those "instances and descriptions"? Bannerman quoted 1 Corinthians 5:3-5, 13, in which the apostle Paul exercised his authority in regard to the excommunication of the man who was living in immorality in Corinth! This is an example of *apostolic* authority, not of the authority of *elders*. If anything, this passage of Scripture indicates the practice of "rule with congregational consent", since the whole congregation was to be involved: "...when you are gathered together, ...deliver such a one to Satan (verses 4 and 5)," "Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you are truly unleavened (verse 7)."

By these attempts at refuting the Independent principle of "rule with congregational consent", Bannerman thought it sufficient to have established the Presbyterian idea of representation. He therefore offered no other proof. However, a mere *statement* of one's position plus the *refutation* of the opponents' positions do not constitute *proof* of one's position. It only amounts to an *assertion* of one's position. What positive proof has been offered by others to support the Presbyterian position? We consider that next.

10.4.2 In Presbyterianism

Presbyterians believe only in "rule by elders" but not "rule with congregational consent". As to the manner of ruling, Presbyterians believe the principle of "rule by representation", meaning that, once elected by the congregation, the elders rule as representatives of the church without the necessity of the congregation consenting to the

[29] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 246.

decisions of the elders. William Cunningham described this principle as follows:

> "Presbyterians have always denied, upon good and sufficient grounds, that Scripture assigns to the ordinary members of the church anything like judicial authority in the decision of controversies, or in the ordinary administration of the general government of the church. But they have generally admitted, on the ground of what is contained in this chapter and in other parts of the New Testament, that, in *important* ecclesiastical questions, the nature and merits of the case, and the grounds and reasons of the judgment, should, in so far as circumstances allowed of it, be laid before the ordinary members of the church; and that their consent and concurrence should, *if possible*, be obtained. Presbyterians, indeed, have never assigned to the ordinary members of the church, because they could see no warrant in Scripture for doing so, the same distinct and definite place and influence in the ordinary regulation of ecclesiastical affairs in general, as they have ascribed to them in the appointment of their office-bearers; in other words, they have *never* held their consent or concurrence in the decisions pronounced by the office-bearers in the ordinary regulation of ecclesiastical affairs to be *necessary or indispensable*, so that the withholding or refusal of their consent nullified or invalidated the judgment, or formed a bar in the way of its taking practical effect."[30] (Italics added.)

The passage of Scripture referred to in the above quote is Acts 15. His arguments run exactly along the same line that we have given above in proving the principle of "rule with congregational consent". His conclusion is also the same, namely that it was the elders who made the decision, which was then proposed to the congregation for its consent.[31] That is so far as the passage goes. Cunningham, however, went further from there to declare the position of Presbyterians as quoted above, claiming that congregational consent is not "necessary or indispensible"! No other passages of Scripture was

[30] W. Cunningham, Vol. 1, p. 56.

considered. We have shown already the relevance of those passages that described the election of office-bearers, the appointment of delegates of the church, and the exercise of church discipline, all of which prove the principle of "rule with congregational consent". Instead of dealing with such passages, Cunningham had only made the vague reference to "other parts of the New Testament", admitting that they show the need for congregational consent. However, he refused to conclude from all these manifest evidences that a general principle may be drawn from them, namely that of "rule with congregational consent". It is of interest to us to analyse the manner by which he disposed of these evidences. A number of steps are involved.

First, those scriptures that show the need of congregational consent in the appointment of office-bearers are isolated. The principle of "popular election" is admitted which, in fact, involves congregational consent. These passages are now fenced up so that they are not seen together with other relevant passages. This is the beginning of the "divide and rule", or "isolate and destroy", tactic.

Secondly, by focusing only on the latter category of references, he admitted congregational consent up to a point, namely, that it is limited to important matters. By what criteria a matter is to be judged "important" is not mentioned. This is, in reality, the "dilute and render ineffective" tactic.

Thirdly, even in those "important ecclesiastical questions" congregational consent "should be" – note, not "must be" – obtained; and that only "if possible", and "in so far as circumstances allowed". This is the "disarm and subdue" tactic.

Finally, the *coup de grace*, the finishing stroke, is delivered by claiming that the withholding of congregational consent does not invalidate or nullify the decisions of the elders!

If we were to adopt the same spirit as these Presbyterians, we might say that theirs is a system that is just short of outright tyranny! Did not Cunningham say that the withholding of congregational consent nullifies not the elders' decision, and that it forms no bar in the way of its taking practical effect? Would not this allow the elders the right to "bulldoze" their way through the congregation, insisting that their decision be executed even when the congregation disagrees

[31] W. Cunningham, Vol. 1, p. 55.

with it? Did not Bannerman define the words "submit yourselves" as "a military word, implying subjection of the most absolute kind" and "the most entire and simple obedience", and all these in relation to the church members submitting themselves to their elders?[29] The basic correctness of these definitions is not called into question here, but the emphases in such a context is surely out of place: "*subjection of the most absolute kind*", "*the most entire and simple* obedience".[32]

James Bannerman went to the extent of casting aspersion upon Independency with these words:

> "The practical result is, that the theory is utterly unworkable, and that the government is just a specimen of what is known in mechanics as "unstable equilibrium", oscillating to and fro between a tyranny of the one and of the many. Let the "centre of gravity", the prepondering weight of character and energy, lie with the minister, and the Independent system becomes a monarchy, more or less constitutional. Let the weight of influence lie with the deacons or managers, or with the people, and the Independent system becomes an oligarchy more or less close, or a democracy more or less turbulent. In short, if all have an equal right to govern, practically it is a mere chance how the balance shall adjust itself, and in whose hands the power shall ultimately be lodged."[33]

We would protest that this is nothing but a caricature of Independency. We would answer – No, Independency is not an unworkable system, and it is not to be likened to the case of "unstable equilibrium" in mechanics. It is more accurately compared to the system of "dynamic equilibrium", as exemplified by the swing of the pendulum – ever swinging, in a predictable and steady fashion. There is that unique interplay between the elders and members in the process of rule. In it is found all the necessary safeguards against excesses by either party, yet without stifling the spiritual vitality of the whole. That system alone is capable of giving proper expression to the "diversity within unity" of a New Testament church (1 Cor. 12).

[32] Vine.

[33] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 245, footnote.

The "stable equilibrium" of Presbyterianism, indirectly claimed by Bannerman, is stability of the static kind. It is prone to tyranny in those who bear the power of rule. It tends to lead the whole system to a dead orthodoxy, as has actually happened in many Presbyterian denominations through the centuries. Dissent of any kind tends to be suppressed. Overheating inevitably happens. Fragmentation then follows. Let those who have eyes look around at the various Presbyterian denominations and see for themselves the truth of these observations!

10.4.3 In Episcopacy

In Episcopacy, the principle of "rule with consent" is totally overthrown. The authority to rule the church is passed down from individuals higher up in the hierarchy, and who are detached from the congregation. Human laws and traditions are made binding upon church members, with no possibility of the church members seeking redress to them. The Anglican Church perpetuated the same system of government practised by the Church of Rome. This was one of the main matters over which the Separatists and Puritans of seventeenth century England contended against. We do not wish to linger over the practices of this unbiblical system of church government.

10.4.4 In Congregationalism

In Congregationalism, the power and authority of rule resides in the congregation. The elders do not have the power to rule or govern the church in the biblical sense. If ever it is claimed that the elders do rule, the authority they have is given them by the congregation. They are, therefore, "ruling" under the *authority* of the congregation! The principle of "rule by elders" is ignored, and replaced by one that is rightly called "rule by the congregation". If ever scriptures are quoted to support that system of rule, they are those which we have used to prove the principle of "rule with consent" above. Congregationalists thus confuse "rule with congregational consent" with "rule by the congregation". By holding to the latter, the former is, of course, comprehended as well.

The way Congregationalism operates in practice is that the church members raise issues in the church business meeting, and the deci-

sions are made by obtaining a consensus of opinion from all the members through voting. The elders, if there are any, or the executive committee, are mere servants of the church instead of servants of Christ. They are there to do the bidding of the church. The "chairman", who need not be the pastor, chairs the church business meeting, the "secretary" takes down the minutes, and the "treasurer" keeps the accounts. To arrive at a decision, the various possibilities are raised by the members, and a choice is made by a majority-vote. This contrasts with the procedure in Independency, in which the elders present the decision to the congregation for its consent. In some extreme situations known to this author, there are "directors" of various sorts to do the jobs assigned to them by the congregation – the "director of evangelism" to be in charge of evangelism, the "director of worship" to lead in the worship services, and the "director of education" to be in charge of planning the teaching curriculum of the church.

Ineffectiveness, disorderliness, and even anarchy prevail in many a Congregational church. A pastor is sacked at will, lobbying for votes is often seen in the church business meetings, and good gospel enterprises are often aborted because of a lack of consensus. This is not to say that nothing good has come out of Congregational churches. We are only pointing out the weaknesses *inherent* in the system, which have manifested themselves in many a Congregational church.

10.5 Summary

1. The principle of "rule with congregational consent" may be defined as the practice whereby elders seek the consent of the congregation as they exercise rule over the church. The consent is given implicitly 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 order". It is the first "key of the kingdom of heaven". 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 jurisdiction". It is the second "key of the kingdom of heaven".

2. This principle may be proven from three considerations – the nature of the church, the nature of church-power, and apostolic examples. The apostolic examples include the appointment of elders and deacons (Acts 1:15-26; 6:1-7; 14:21-23), the appointment of delegates of churches (Acts 15:1-3; 1 Cor. 5:4-5; 2 Cor. 8:19), the settlement of disputes (Acts 15:22, 23, 25), and the exercise of church discipline (1 Cor. 5:4-5, 7).

3. In the actual governing of the church, various principles are applied. The principle of "rule by elders" is put in operation by the elders making the decisions and leading the congregation to give its consent. "Rule with consent" operates when the congregation gives its consent to the decisions of the elders under their guidance. "The priority of the ministry" is recognised when the pastor leads the elders in the decision-making process, and chairs the church business meetings. "The validity of ruling elders" is shown by the manifold duties of the eldership. "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.

4. The principle of "the unity of the eldership" must not be breached by the ruling elders or the pastor. The ruling elders should not fail to support the pastor when criticism or concern are brought by church members against the ministry of the pastor. If not wisely handled, polarisation and division might occur in the church. The pastor, on his part, should heed the advice or suggestions of the elders. Inability to receive criticism of his ministry, and intransigence on his part, can result in alienation between the pastor and the church members.

5. The principle of "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. "Rule with congregational consent" is not upheld in Episcopalism. In Con-

gregationalism, 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 comprehended.

Eleven

THE GATHERED CHURCH

The discussion on church government is not complete without a consideration of the *subjects* of government. There are officers appointed in the church 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". For a correct appreciation of this principle we need to return to a consideration of the nature of the church. A different understanding of the latter will naturally lead to a different understanding of the former. As will be shown in the next chapter, the last principle, namely "the communion of churches", is strictly not of the essence of church government, although it is still within the purview of "church polity". The principle of "the gathered church" completes our description of the form of church government. By referring back to the nature of the church, we are in effect coming full circle to where we began in Chapter 2, when we considered the principle of "autonomy".

11.1 The "Gathered Church" Principle

The principle of "the gathered church" actually arises out of what is commonly called the *essence* of the church. The essence of the church may be further divided into two elements – the *matter*, and the *form*.[1]

[1] JO, Vol. 16, p. 11.

11.1.1 The matter

As far as the *matter* of the church is concerned, it is made up of saints, that is, true believers in Christ. The kingdom of Christ is different from all other kingdoms in the world. As is to be expected, its membership is unique. Not only are the obviously profane excluded from Christ's kingdom (2 Tim. 3:1-5; 1 Cor. 5:11-13), those admitted are limited to the regenerate – those born of the Spirit of God (Jn. 3:3; Tit. 3:3-5). Although God alone knows who are truly regenerate, the church is called upon to judge by the external life and profession of those who seek membership in the church of Jesus Christ. John Owen said:

> "God alone is judge concerning this regeneration, as unto its internal, real principle and state in the souls of men (Acts 15:8; Rev. 2:23), whereon the participation of all the spiritual advantages of the covenant of grace doth depend. The church is judge of its evidences and fruits in their external demonstration, as unto a participation of the outward privileges of a regenerate state, and no farther (Acts 8:13)."[2]

Today, this is often called a *credible profession of faith*. A prospective church member must be examined as to whether his profession of faith is a believable one. How may a credible profession of faith be determined so that the individual may be admitted into membership of the church? John Owen gave the following indications:[3,4]

1. A competent knowledge of the gospel, especially the doctrines concerning the person and work of Christ (Mt. 16:15-19).

2. A professed subjection to the authority of Christ in the church (Mt. 28:18-20; 2 Cor. 8:5). This is shown in practice by the individual undergoing baptism.

[2] JO, Vol. 16, p. 13.

[3] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 15-17.

[4] See also E. Hulse, *The Testimony of Baptism*, Chap. 13. This book is a fine introduction to baptism and covenant theology.

3. Knowledge of, and consent to, the doctrine of self-denial and bearing of the cross (Mt. 10:37-39; Mk. 8:34, 38; Lk. 9:23; Phil. 3:18; Acts 4:10, 11, 20; 24:14).

4. Conviction and confession of sin, with the way of deliverance by Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 3:21).

5. The constant performance of all known duties of religion, both of piety in the public and private worship of God, as well as those of charity with respect to others (Mt. 28:19, 20; James 2:18).

6. A careful abstinence from all known sins that might give scandal or offence to the world or the church (1 Cor. 10:32; Phil. 1:10).

John Owen added that this confession of one's faith is to be made in spite of fear, shame, the course of the world, and the opposition of all enemies whatever.[5] Isaac Watts (1674-1748) confirmed the great care taken by the early Independents to examine prospective members of the church, saying:

> "They think it not sufficient ground to be admitted a member, if the person be only examined as to his doctrinal knowledge and sobriety of conversation; but they require with all some hints, or means, or evidences of the work of grace on their souls, to be professed by them, and that not only to the minister but to the elders also, who are joint rulers in the church.
>
> They do not require (as some think) a word of scripture, or time, or place, or sermon, by which they are converted; for very few can tell this; but only they discourse and examine them a little of the way of their conviction of sin, of their being brought to know Christ; or at least ask them what evidences they can give why they hope they are true believers, and try to search whether there be sincerity in the heart, as much as may be found by outward profession, that they may, as much as in them lies, exclude hypocrites."[6]

[5] JO, Vol. 16, p. 17.

The thoroughness of the Independents in examining a candidate for baptism and membership will alarm many churches today. It will put to shame even some Reformed Baptist churches that are rather lax in this matter! In so doing they were only acting consistent with their understanding of the "gathered church" principle. This is not to say that they were unreasonably strict, to the point of imposing conditions of membership that were not required by the word of God. No, they did not require that the people be sinless, and theologians, before admitting them to church membership. They acted only according to their understanding of conversion and the nature of the church. They examined the candidates because it was required by the "gathered church" principle.

In contrast, things are so different these days. A perverse *easy-believism* is preached from many pulpits. A worldly criterion is used to measure the health of a church, namely, the number of people added to the membership roll. The situation is not made any better by the loose idea of the visible (local) church that prevails. The exercise of care in examining candidates for baptism and church membership, so as to exclude hypocrites, is looked upon as "unloving", "judgmental", and "wrong".

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. That is far from the truth, however. There is here a failure to appreciate that that was a dangerous time for people to identify themselves as Christians. The Christian faith had not become a respectable religion. The events leading up to Calvary were still fresh on the mind of the people. Before too long, persecution was to burst out upon the infant church. A readiness to make a public profession of faith, by baptism, was clear proof that the people concerned were sincere in their belief in Christ. No doubt, there were people like Ananias and Sapphira, and Simon the sorcerer, who were unwittingly admitted into church membership, but those cases do not show that the early churches were lax in their standards. They only show that the early churches examined the candidates as best as they could, leaving it to God to judge who were the truly regenerate.

Then, there is the argument from the parable of the wheat and

[6]D. Fountain, p. 104.

the tares in Matthew 13. It is claimed that the church will always be made up of the regenerate and the unregenerate. The Lord alone knows who are His. We must leave it to Him to judge on the last day. This, however, is a perverse argument which has caused untold harm to the cause of Christ. The Lord is not talking about the church. He is not condoning, let alone advocating, mixed and impure churches. We shall have occasion to discuss the parable again below.

11.1.2 The form

This leads us to consider the *form* of the church. God's elect are not called out of the world to live as they like. Rather, they are renewed in their nature so that there is a willingness on their part to want to follow God's will for them. It is the will of God that believers be gathered into local churches so as to serve God and to worship Him according to the manner He has prescribed in the Bible. Chapter 26, paragraphs 2, 5 and 6 of the 1689 Baptist Confession are relevant to our present discussion. Paragraphs 2 and 5 tell us that only true believers should make up the membership of local churches. Paragraph 6 is virtually a full description of the "gathered church" principle. It reads, in full, as follows:

> "The members of these churches are saints by calling, visibly manifesting and evidencing (in and by their profession and walking) their obedience unto that call of Christ; and do willingly consent to walk together, according to the appointment of Christ; giving up themselves to the Lord, and one to another, by the will of God, in professed subjection to the ordinances of the Gospel."

The Savoy Declaration of 1658 has its equivalent statement. These statements clearly declare that both voluntary consent and covenant commitment are required for the formation of a church. The framers of the Confession for some reason avoided the term "covenant", possibly because of not wishing to be associated with "The Solemn League and Covenant".[7] Under the cruel rule of Charles I, Archbishop Laud tried to impose bishops and a liturgy upon the Church of Scotland. The Scots reacted by producing "The Solemn League and Covenant", which in its essence was an assertion that Presbyterianism alone must be introduced, while Prelacy be abolished.[8]

This, of course, did not go well with the royalists, with the result that tension and persecution, followed.

Voluntary consent arises from *the nature of discipleship*, which is voluntary. God, by His grace, brings a sinner to faith in Christ. The new birth transforms the sinner into a willing subject of Christ. The life of obedience to His word is the mark of the true believer (Mt. 28: 20; 2 Cor. 9:13). His obedience is imperfect, but it is the vital principle of his renewed nature. It leads him to voluntarily join a church (Acts 2:41, 42; 5:13, 14). Voluntary consent also arises from *the headship of Christ*. Christ is alone the head of the church, and the lord of every member in that church. The believer submits himself to Christ, whose will it is that he should be joined to a local church. This is in accord with *the liberty of conscience*. Just as in other areas of the Christian life, no coercion from men should be permitted in the matter of church membership. Only the force of truth should move the believer. His conscience is bound only by the law of Christ (2 Cor. 1:24; 1 John 4:1).

Covenant commitment is also involved. By this is meant that members of the church voluntarily bind themselves together to form a church, mutually agreeing to carry out all that is agreed upon as members of that church. Many Independent churches of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had covenants committed to writing and subscribed by their members. For Scripture warrant they would point to the covenant theology of the Bible in general, and to 2 Corinthians 8:5 in particular: "They... first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God."

To these must be added the many instances when the nation of Israel committed itself afresh to God by covenant (Ex. 24:1-8; Dt. 29:10-15; Josh. 24:19-28; 2 Kings 11:4, 17; 23:3; 1 Chr. 11:3; 2 Chr. 15:12; 23:1, 3, 16; 34:31-32; Ezra 10:3-5; Neh. 9:38). We are here not talking about the "covenant of grace", but the manner by which the nation of Israel consented to bind themselves to God. Although the New Testament churches constituted a new phenomenon compared to Old Testament Israel, there was nevertheless a certain continuity in the dealings of God with His people. The churches of the New Testament would have patterned themselves after the

[7] K. W. H. Howard, p. 238.
[8] D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *From Puritanism to Nonconformity*, pp. 19-20.

covenanting community of God's people in the Old Testament (2 Cor. 6:16-18; 8:5; Heb. 8).

Of the Independent churches in seventeenth century England, K. W. H. Howard wrote:

> "It is not putting matters too strongly to say that the covenant idea was the root principle of their church order; and from it, with due appeal to scripture, flowed the related principles of membership and discipline."[9]

John Owen gave the further argument that "the constitution of such a society... hath its foundation in the light of nature, so far as it hath anything in common with other voluntary relations and societies..."[10]. In other words, the church, although a unique institution, shares certain things in common with other societies in the world in that a covenant, or mutual consent, is required of the constituting members for it to exist properly. As members, there are privileges to enjoy and duties to perform. Discipline needs to be maintained in that society.

11.1.3 Church discipline

To the early Independents, the negative side of holiness is separation from the world, from sin, and from wrong doctrines. The doctrine of separation is grounded on such scriptures as Romans 16:16-17; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; Ephesians 5:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15; 2 Timothy 3:5; 1 John 1:6-7; and Revelation 14:9; 18:4. John Owen declared:

> "He that will not separate from the world and false worship is separate from Christ.
>
> Causeless separation from established churches, walking according to the order of the gospel (though perhaps failing in the practice of some things of small concernment), is no small sin; but separation from the sinful practices, and disorderly walkings, and false unwarranted ways of

[9] K. W. H. Howard, p. 238.
[10] JO, Vol. 16, p. 30.

> worship in any, is to fulfil the precept of not partaking in other men's sins."[11]

The theme of biblical separation was very much with churches of the Independent tradition in those days. Decays in the life of the churches were traced to the decline of personal holiness. Church discipline was never treated as an option. Examples of the conscientious exercise of church discipline are seen in the life of the church in Axminster as well as in John Bunyan's church in Bedford.[12,13] In the first instance, church discipline was implemented in cases of lying, stealing, fraudulent dealing, drunkenness, disorderly walking, enthusiasm, evil relationship, immodesty, and adultery. Church purity was maintained in Bunyan's church by putting straight those who had grievously strayed. Drinking and card-playing were among the things he had to deal with. Applications for membership from those not living holy lives were turned down. An examination of the manner and the reasons of discipline will reveal that none of these churches could be charged with "harshness" or "heavy shepherding". Rather, the concern throughout was for the purity of the church and the restoration of sinners. Love to God was shown by love for souls.

Church discipline is a broad subject that warrants treatment of its own. It belongs to the domain of "church polity", and was treated in detail by John Owen.[14] We have included Stuart Olyott's helpful and concise work on this subject as an appendix to this book. A church can be too lax in the exercise of church discipline, such that wrong doctrines, worldliness and immorality are tolerated. It can also be too severe, such that individuals are dealt with in a highhanded and authoritarian way. Oh, for wisdom, courage, firmness, and love in the exercise of church discipline!

From the foregoing, it is clear that the *gathered church* is, in fact, the *visible church* according to the definition of Independency. Hezekiah Harvey's definition of the visible church may be adapted as a concise definition of the principle of "the gathered church" (see Chapter 2, Autonomy):

[11] JO, Vol. 13, pp. 68, 69.
[12] K. W. H. Howard, pp. 241-246.
[13] F. M. Harrison, pp. 164-165.
[14] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 151-183, 209-237.

> "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."

11.1.4 An implicit covenant?

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 and conducts an orderly service of worship, at which everyone would raise his right hand above the shoulder and read the covenant aloud together with the others. They then affix their signatures to a copy of the covenant, which is usually attached to the membership book.

In the Bible, the "giving of the hand", which is generally taken to mean the raising of the right hand, was the manner by which an oath or promise was made (Ezra 10:19; Lam. 5:6; Ezek. 17:18). The raising of the right hand is today universally accepted as the way to solemnly engage in an oath or make a vow. It was the way by which the early Independents entered into a covenant with one another and with the Lord. It was also the way by which they renewed their church covenant.[15] The church does not have to read the covenant together every time a new member is added to it. The new member need not read the covenant aloud to the church before he is accepted. It may be required of him to make a public profession of faith and agree to abide by the church covenant. He agrees to the covenant in writing when he signs the membership roll.

The attentive reader would notice that many congregations that go by the name of "church" today do not have a covenant that is drawn up and subscribed to by the members verbally or in writing. In the Malaysian situation, many churches that choose to be registered with the government have membership rolls in compliance

[15] K. W. H. Howard, pp. 31, 123, 238.

with the requirement of civil law. Apart from this, there is no definite concept of church membership. In fact, most Brethren churches would even deny that there should be a definite church covenant or a membership roll. It is assumed that whoever professes to be a Christian and comes regularly to the meetings of the church is a member. Many churches thus have an *implicit* covenant. Are we to recognise congregations that have only an implicit covenant as true churches?

With John Owen, we would accept such congregations as true churches, as long as the marks of a true church are seen – namely the proclamation of the gospel, the administration of the ordinances, and the exercise of discipline of some sort. Of course, underlying these marks, the characteristics of a true church should be discernible: unity, sanctity, catholicity, apostolicity, and perpetuity. (See Chapter 2, Autonomy.) Such churches that do not have an explicit covenant are, however, defective in their understanding of the local church. The more explicit the covenant in a church, the more it will glorify Christ and experience His blessings. Said Owen:

> "Now whereas these things are, in themselves and for the substance of them, known gospel duties, which all believers are indispensably obliged unto, the more express our engagement is concerning them, the more do we glorify Christ in our profession, and the greater sense of our duty will abide on our consciences, and the greater encouragement be given unto the performance of mutual duties, as also the more evident will the warranty be for the exercise of church-power. Yet do I not deny the being of churches unto those societies wherein these things are virtually only observed, especially in churches of some continuance, wherein there is at least an implicit consent unto the first covenant constitution."[16]

11.1.5 The minimum number of members

How many people should there be before the group may be constituted into a church? We have noted the fact that many people today

[16] JO, Vol. 16, p. 14. A comparison with marriage will help us see the importance of an explicit covenant.

mistakenly think that any gathering of believers constitute a church. (See Chapter 2, Autonomy.) They base this idea on Matthew 18:19-20,

> "If two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

This passage, however, only gives believers the right or power to meet together in the name of Christ for mutual edification. 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 (Jn. 1:12). In the case of two or three believers, *mutual consent* must be added to individual faith before there can be the right or power to meet in Christ's name for mutual exhortation, instruction, admonition, and prayer.[17]

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 possible. This, as we have seen, is the church covenant that we have discussed above, in which the members give themselves to one another and to the Lord. The question immediately before us is: "How many believers are needed before a church is constituted?" There are different opinions. John Gill believed that a minimum of ten is required. In Matthew 18:15-18 the offending and the offended parties, together with two witnesses, make up four persons. They are to appear before the church, which must consist of a number greater than the people involved, which should be six or more. Ten is therefore the minimum number, which is also the number of a congregation with the Jews. The congregation in Ephesus began with about twelve men (Acts 19:7)[18]

John Cotton and other Independents of his time believed that a minimum of seven is required.[19] Cotton's argument is that there are the offended and the offender who, together with at least one witness, make up three. Believing that there are four sorts of officers in the church – namely, a pastor, a teacher, an elder and a deacon –

[17] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 36-37.
[18] J. Gill, Vol. 2, p. 562.

the minimum number to constitute a church is seven. If we follow Cotton's method of computation, but accept only two basic officers in the church – namely, an elder and a deacon – we would have five as a minimum.

We need not be too scrupulous about the exact number needed, however. The basic principle is that it should not be too small such that the group cannot function as a viable church. The ideal would be to have a minimum of ten wage-earning members so that together, they may support a full-time pastor. That is assuming that each contributes a minimum of ten percent of their earnings to the church. It is to be noted, however, that officers in the church are necessary only for the *well-being* of the church and not for its *being*. It would be better to have a group of five persons constituted into a church, and request the help of an established church to provide the pastoral oversight, than to leave themselves in an incoherent state in this hostile world.

11.2 The Principle Upheld

Congregationalism and Independency had traditionally upheld the principle of "the gathered church". This had largely contributed to their being confounded together as one and the same form of church government. The General Baptists, who were Arminian in their soteriology, held to the Congregational form of church government. The Particular Baptists, who were Calvinistic in soteriology, held to the Independent form of church government. Then, there were the paedobaptist Independents of the like of John Cotton, John Owen, and Isaac Watts. The term "Independents" was often used to refer only to the paedobaptists while their baptist counterparts were known simply as "Particular Baptists".

The Independents, because of retaining the federal theology of the Presbyterians, found their view of baptism conflicting with "the gathered church" principle. It was contrary to the central concept of the church covenant. If a credible profession of faith, holiness, separation, and voluntary consent were indispensable to church covenant, infants are automatically excluded. Infant baptism was contrary to both the matter and the form of the visible church, and made mock-

[19] K. W. H. Howard, p. 237.

ery of the notion of visible saints. Many felt the difficulty while others, like John Owen, conveniently overlooked it.[20]

John Owen declared in one place:

> "Children do belong unto and have an interest in their parents' covenant, not only in the promise of it, which gives them right unto baptism, but in the profession of it in the church covenant, which gives them a right unto all the privileges of the church whereof they are capable, until they voluntarily relinquish their claim unto them.
>
> Baptizing the children of church members, giving them thereby an admission into the visible catholic church, puts an obligation on the officers of the church to take care, what in them lieth, that they may be kept and preserved meet members of it, by a due watch over them and instruction of them."[21]

He did not seemed bothered about the obvious contradiction with the nature of the church, which he declared unequivocably as follows:

> "The church is a voluntary society. Persons otherwise absolutely free, as unto all the rules, laws, and ends of such a society, do of their own wills and free choice coalesce into it. This is the original of all churches, as hath been declared. 'They first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God,' 2 Cor. 8:5. ...None, therefore, can coalesce in such a society, or adhere unto it, or be any way belonging unto it, but by his own free choice and consent."[22]

The inconsistency of infant baptism with "the gathered church" principle is obvious. Believer's baptism alone is consistent with it, and therefore with thorough-going Independency, which was practised by the early Particular Baptists.

[20] K. W. H. Howard, p. 237.
[21] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 22-23.
[22] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 66-67.

11.3 The Principle Denied

The Episcopalians and Presbyterians were, and still are, paedobaptists. In retaining infant baptism, they had of necessity to reject the principle of "the gathered church". Since they also believed in the Reformation principle of "sola scriptura", they were obliged to do two things in order to retain infant baptism: (i) To find a biblical justification for the practice; and (ii) To come up with an idea of the church which could accommodate the practice.

11.3.1 Paedobaptist theology

To the first, the paedobaptists have developed what they call "covenant theology" when, in reality, it should be called "paedobaptist theology". This is for the reason that there has always been a covenant theology that was consistently upheld by the Particular Baptists, minus the trappings of infant baptism. In the appendix to the 1677 Confession of Faith of the Particular Baptists, the case against infant baptism was argued out clearly and graciously from Scripture. This, it must be remembered, was done in the context of a clear affirmation of covenant theology, contained in Chapter 7 of the confession.

During the Reformation, Luther and Zwingli had at first agreed with the Anabaptists that there is no biblical basis for infant baptism.[23] The practical implications, however, appeared too drastic for them to take, and they withdrew to the position of upholding infant baptism. In the debates with his former disciple, Balthasar Hubmaier, Zwingli appealed to the covenant God had made with Abraham in Genesis 17 and applied it to New Testament church membership. He argued that baptism in the New Testament must be identified with circumcision in the Old Testament. Since one was administered to infants, the other should be also.[24] John Calvin was to develop this concept further, by giving the various strands of argument a certain unity, in which Abraham is seen as the federal head of the household of God.[25]

The paedobaptist Puritans adopted Calvin's federal theology. This view was challenged early by their contemporaries. In 1643 John

[23] E. H. Broadbent, pp. 148, 168, 173.
[24] T. Bergsten, pp. 286-297.
[25] J. Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk. 4, Ch. 16.

Tombes attempted to persuade a special committee of the Westminster Assembly of the error of infant baptism.[26] John Owen attempted to counter Tombes, but failed to make a convincing case for paedobaptism. Like most paedobaptist theologians, Owen got out of form from his normal self when he came to consider baptism. He argued from the silence of Scripture, made unwarranted assumptions, drew dubious inferences, and ignored those Scriptures that have direct bearing on baptism.[27]

Apart from the appendix to the 1677 Confession of Faith, the Particular Baptists had produced many writings to uphold believer's baptism over against infant baptism. This was due, in part, to the controversies which raged within their own rank. We shall have occasion to consider these below. Owen seemed to have lived oblivious of this vast amount of literature produced by the Baptists. By his own confession, he never actually interacted much with people outside his own communion.[28]

Through the centuries, much paper and ink have been expended on both sides of the debate. Paedobaptists have refused to see that it is not possible to identify baptism with circumcision. Circumcision was administered to male infants only, whether or not they were within the covenant of grace. Ishmael, who was not a covenant seed, was circumcised. And so were the servants of Abraham (Gen. 17:25-27). If baptism is identified with circumcision, female believers would have to be excluded from baptism, and male servants would have to be baptised regardless of whether or not they are regenerate!

Baptism is *analogous* to circumcision, and not *identical* with it.[29] Both are covenant signs, but one is the sign of the old dispensation (i.e. the old administration of the one covenant of grace), while the other is the sign of the new. The *newness* of the New Testament administration is clearly spelt out in Hebrews 8:7-8, where it is contrasted with the old, Sinaitic, covenant. All that were typified in the old administration have found their ultimate fulfilment in Christ. Those who have faith in Christ are alone the true seed of Abraham (Gen. 17:7 cf. Gal. 3:7-9, 29). The promise of blessing to all nations

[26] E. Hulse, *The Testimony of Baptism*, p. 134.
[27] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 258-268.
[28] JO, Vol. 13, p. 223.

is fulfilled in the salvation of elect from among the Jews as well as the Gentiles (Gen. 22:18 cf. Gal. 3:8). The promise of the land of Canaan to Abraham finds its fulfilment in the kingdom of heaven, which was ushered in by Christ (Gen. 17:8 cf. Heb. 11:13-16; 12:22-24; 1 Pet. 1:4-5; 2:6-8).

Many paedobaptists would agree with us up to this point. But what about circumcision? How has it been fulfilled? What exactly is the teaching of Scripture? The New Testament shows clearly that circumcision finds its fulfilment in regeneration, and not in baptism. The clearest passage on this is Colossians 2:11-12:

> "In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."

Other passages of Scripture show the same thing. In Romans 4:11, we are told that Abraham received the sign of circumcision which was "a seal of the righteousness of faith which he had while still uncircumcised..." The literal circumcision of the flesh now counts for nothing (Gal. 5:1-6). The important thing now is "the righteousness of faith" that comes to all those who are born of the Spirit. Believers, and believers only, are "the circumcision who worship God in the Spirit". Believers, and believers only, are the Jews inwardly, for "circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit (Rom. 2:29)". Thus, the Bible itself shows us that circumcision pointed to regeneration, and not to baptism. Baptism is a *new* sign of the *new* covenant (that is, the new administration, or expression, of the one covenant of grace), introduced to show the believer's union with Christ, in His death and resurrection, remission of sins, and consecration unto God (Rom. 6:3-5; Col. 2:12; Gal. 3:27; Mark 1:4). While there are similarities between circumcision and baptism, there are also differences.

The *old sign* was for the purpose of indicating membership in the Old Testament community of God's people, namely the nation of

[29] D. Kingdom, pp. 23-37. Kingdon's book, *Children of Abraham*, is probably the best by a contemporary writer on covenant theology, *vis a vis* paedobaptist theology. Out of print at the point of writing, it is hoped that the book will be reproduced.

Israel. The *new sign* was for initiating a believer into the New Testament community of God's people, namely the visible (local) church. The old sign was a *type*, which *foreshadowed* the New Testament reality of regeneration. Regeneration, the "circumcision of the heart", is symbolised by the totally new sign of baptism. The *outward sign* of circumcision cannot point to the *outward sign* of baptism. By definition, the anti-type that answers to the type must be a spiritual, inward reality. The physical land of Canaan pointed to the spiritual church of Jesus Christ. The physical seed of Abraham pointed to the spiritual seed of Abraham. The physical blessings given to Abraham and his physical descendants pointed to the spiritual blessings of all those who come to faith in Christ. Circumcision must point to the spiritual, inward reality of regeneration. It is not possible to equate baptism with circumcision.

Obvious as this is, there are still those who refuse to accept it. Herman Hoeksema for example, agreed that "circumcision belongs to the time of shadows".[30] Herman Hanko agrees that the promises given to Abraham belong to "the dispensation of types and shadows".[31] Yet they both adamantly *identify* circumcision with baptism! They believe that in the Old Testament, "the reality was there...under the form of the type..."[32] If the "was there" is understood figuratively, in the sense that the type was a sign, or pledge, of the reality, there would have been no problem. However, this is not the case with Hanko. He takes the "reality" as literally there, but covered, or camouflaged by the sign! He can do that only by using the word "reality" in the qualitative sense of "being real, true, not false". That, surely, is not the correct way to use the word in the context of discussing "types and shadows".

Properly speaking, in theology, types and shadows point to some definite, inward, spiritual fulfilment in the future. It is the fulfilment that is known as the reality. The reality was promised to Abraham. It had not been realised yet at that time. The promised Messiah had not come. Calvary was still future. Just as hope that is seen is not hope, so also promise that is realised is not promise (Rom. 8:24). If the reality was there already, there would have been no need for the

[30] Quoted in H. Hanko, p. 41.
[31] H. Hanko, pp. 37, 45.
[32] H. Hanko, p. 38.

promises. See Galatians 3:15-18 and Hebrews 11:13. Louis Berkhof said this of types:

> "A type always prefigures something future. ...it is necessary to have due regard to the essential difference between type and antitype. The one represents truth on a lower, the other, the same truth on a higher stage. To pass from the type to the antitype is to ascend from that in which the carnal preponderates to that which is purely spiritual, from the external to the internal, from the present to the future, from the earthly to the heavenly."[33]

The basic problem of the paedobaptists is their adoption of a "flat theology", in which the progression in biblical revelation is not consistently recognised. They often accuse those who differ from them of outright or incipient dispensationalism, claiming that they fail to uphold the unity of the Bible. That may be true of General Baptists, who are notorious for their weakness, and even disdain, of covenant theology. We have shown in Chapter 2 (on "Autonomy") that it is necessary to uphold both the unity of the Bible as well as the progressive and cumulative nature of revelation. Within the unity of the Bible, there is progression and fulfilment. This has been consistently upheld by the Particular Baptists.

11.3.2 A visible universal church

What about the second problem faced by the paedobaptists? They have had to come up with an idea of the church that could accommodate the inclusion of the so-called "covenant seed", namely the children of believers. Charles Hodge stated the problem as follows:

> "The difficulty on the subject of infant baptism is that baptism from its very nature involves a profession of faith. It is the way in which Christ is to be confessed before men. But infants are incapable of making such confession; therefore they are not proper subjects of baptism. To state the difficulty in another form: The sacraments

[33] L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, pp. 145, 147.

> belong to the members of the Church, i.e., the company of believers. Since infants cannot exercise faith, they are not members of the Church and consequently ought not to be baptized.
>
> In order to justify the baptism of infants, we must attain and authenticate such an idea of the Church as to include the children of believing parents..."[34]

Eight propositions, one building upon the other, followed, by which Charles Hodge attempted to accommodate infant baptism. The eight propositions, however, are nothing but shaky pillars that do not rest on the sure foundation of God's word. Take away any of the pillars, as may easily be done, and the whole structure collapses. His argument begins with the assumption that there is a visible catholic church, in which are unregenerate as well as regenerate members. The parable of the wheat and the tares of Matthew 13 is the only passage of Scripture used to support this contention. The church of the New Testament dispensation is then identified with the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. We see the "flat theology" operating again. The comparison is made that just as infants were included in the Old Testament church, so also they may be included in the New Testament church. An argument from the silence of Scripture follows: "Nothing in the New Testament justifies the exclusion of the children of believers from membership in the church." The whole argument is capped by the general assertion, "Children need and are capable of receiving the benefits of redemption." This is accompanied by the unwarranted assertion that infants may receive the appointed sign and seal of redemption.

Despite the fact that Baptists have for a long while been pointing out the incorrectness of using the parable of the wheat and the tares to support a mixed church membership, paedobaptists continue to do so. They claim that the kingdom of heaven spoken of in the parable is the visible universal church. Since this church is in the world, it is like the world. It is made up of wheat and tares, that is believers and unbelievers. Just as the tares are to be allowed to remain until the last day, so also the unbelievers in the church are to

[34] C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, p. 484.

be allowed to remain in the church.[35,36]

We have problems with such an understanding of the parable. Firstly, we would question the concept of a visible universal church. We have discussed this at length in Chapter 2 (Autonomy) and will not repeat the arguments here. Secondly, the parable does not teach that the kingdom is ever made up of both the regenerate and the unregenerate. We are not told that the kingdom is like *the field* in the way that it is "like a *mustard seed*", or "like *leaven*", or "like *treasure*" (Mt. 13:31, 33, 44). Rather, we are told that it is "like a man who sowed good seed in his field", just as it is "like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls" (Mt. 13:24, 45). In other words, the kingdom *per se* must not be identified, nor compared, with the field.

Verse 38 tells us further that, "The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one." In other words, the sons of the kingdom and the sons of the wicked one are both found *in the world*, not in the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom is *in* the world, but not *of* the world. The kingdom is made up only of the good seed sown by the Son of Man (v. 37). At the end of this age, the tares that are in the world will be gathered up and burned (v. 40). In that way, "all things that offend, and those who practise lawlessness" would have been gathered out of the kingdom (v. 41). The purity of the kingdom would then become manifest (v. 43).

The point we are making is that the parable of the wheat and the tares may not be used to justify the deliberate inclusion of those who do not show a credible profession of faith in the visible (local) church. The parable is not about a visible church – whether local or universal. It is about the invisible church, which consists of only the regenerate. The local church is a microcosm of the universal church. The local church should reflect the characteristics of the universal church. It should therefore be made up of regenerate members, as far as they may be reasonably determined. That is why we speak of those who have a *credible* profession of faith. We know that no local church is pure this side of life, but that does not mean that we are to refrain from maintaining its purity. Much less does it mean that we are to deliberately include the unregenerate into membership,

[35] J. Bannerman, Vol. 1, p. 10.
[36] H. Hanko, p. 84.

which is what the paedobaptists do. By "purity", we mean not only the purity of life in the members of the church, but also the purity of the membership itself. We are back to the *matter* and the *form* of the church. Paedobaptists often make a big fuss about the fact that they do exercise discipline in their churches.[37] They are, however, missing the point altogether.

11.3.3 Federalism and the covenant of grace

In the process of creating a theology of infant baptism, the paedobaptists have perverted the true covenant theology. This has involved the distortion of the idea of federalism, the covenant of grace, the nature of the church, the gospel itself, and the meaning and purpose of baptism. A host of other unbiblical practices have been introduced as well. These are serious charges, which we are obliged to prove, or at least explain. If true, those who continue to indulge in them deserve the censure of others who love the truth. We may not allow our paedobaptist brethren to continue living under the delusion that they are more enlightened than their Baptist brethren. They must not be allowed to continue on in their mocking, swaggering, and militant attitude. We hasten to add that not all paedobaptists are like that. We will provide examples of those who are.[38]

There is a true federal theology in which Adam is the head of the fallen mankind, while Christ is the head of the redeemed race (Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15:20-28, 45-49). Adam represented the whole human race, so that his fall was the fall of the whole human race. Adam was a type, pointing to Christ, the last Adam, who was the second Man (Rom. 5:14; 1 Cor. 15:45, 47). Christ, through His death and resurrection, gives eternal life to all who come to faith in Him. In the same way that all who are in Adam fell with him, all who are in Christ are saved by Him. It would not be right to make Abraham the federal head of redeemed mankind. The Galatians 3:1-4:7 passage must be studied in conjunction with the parallel, and

[37] H. Hanko, pp. 84, 98.

[38] Contemporary paedobaptists writers include Jay Adams who wrote this of the book *Baptizo: An Enquiry into the Meaning of the Word*, by J. W. Dale (P & R Pub. Co.), "Hooray! At last a book that proves that baptism is by sprinkling!"; Gordon H. Clark who gleefully poked fun at the Baptists in his book *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* (P & R Pub. Co.), pp. 243-244.

amplified, passage of Romans 4 and 5. Abraham was "the father of all those who believe (Rom. 4:11)" only in the limited sense that he exemplifies most clearly the truth of "justification by faith alone". He is called a *father* for two reasons: first, because the problem faced by the Galatian churches was caused by Judaizers who took pride in the fact that they were Jews, who had Abraham as their father (Mt. 3:9; Jn. 8:39); and, second, because the use of Abraham as an example of "justification by faith" links naturally with the promises that was given to him as "a father of many nations" (Rom. 4:17; Gal. 3:14, 29). The Galatians and Romans passages actually point us to Christ as the cause, object and fulfilment of all the Old Testament promises.

Men like Hoeksema and Hanko have developed upon the original paedobaptist theology by emphasising the "organism of the covenant". This they do to justify infant baptism and the maintenance of a mixed church membership. In the process, they distort the nature of the covenant of grace. We must analyse the procedures adopted by Hanko to justify a mixed church membership. Three basic steps arc involved.

First, he proposes the idea of an organism, giving the definition – "an organism is an organised and unified system, composed of many diverse parts, but united by a common principle of life."[39] Various examples are given of what constitutes an organism – the church, the human race, nations, and cities.

In the second step, Hanko transposes the nation of Israel directly upon the church of the new dispensation![40] The assumption has been made that Israel is the same organism as the church, which, in a sense, it is. But he fails to give due allowance for progression and fulfilment. He begins by acceptably stating that Israel was a *type* of the church of Christ. But he identifies the antitype with the type, so that the external features of the type – including a mixed membership – are transported into the antitype. The butterfly has been identified with the caterpillar, without due allowance given to the process of development! All the Bible passages quoted by Hanko to support the idea of a mixed church membership in fact teach the contrary – the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12), the church as the vine (Jn. 15), the figure of the olive tree (Rom. 11); and the

[39]H. Hanko, p. 78.

parable of the wheat and tares (Mt. 13).

In the third step, Hanko extends the idea of a mixed membership to the covenant of grace.[41] Here, he confuses the *administration* of the covenant with the covenant itself. He was obviously referring to the administration (the manifestation, or outworking) of the covenant when he says,

> "As the covenant develops in all time, the covenant develops in such a way that, born into the covenant lines, there are both elect and reprobate. Or, to put the matter slightly differently, the purpose of God in sovereign predestination is realized in such a way that election and reprobation cut through the lines of the covenant.[42]

Laboriously, he attempts to swamp the reader with many trite and irrelevant examples (the flow of the river Mississippi, a stalk of wheat, a field of wheat, Heb. 6:4-8). In the next breath, he unmistakably claims that the *covenant of grace* itself includes the reprobate! He says:

> "But the question still remains: why does God will that all the children of believers be baptized? We have already answered that question in part. We have answered that children as well as adults are comprehended *in the covenant of grace*. Believers and their seed are saved. And the seed of believers are saved as children. God has promised that He will gather His elect from us and from our children – and from new believers and their children when new branches are grafted into the olive tree. But we know that all children of believers are baptized. And we know that these children are not all elect." (Italics added. The "all" in this last sentence was actually placed before "these children". We have changed its position so as to convey what we think Hanko meant to say.)
>
> "So it is *within* the covenant. *Within* that covenant are both elect and reprobate seed."[43] (Italics added.)

[40] H. Hanko, pp. 81-84.
[41] H. Hanko, pp. 85-90.
[42] H. Hanko, p. 85.

We would register the strongest protest against such a construction of the covenant of grace. In charity, we would take it that Hanko had not been too careful to differentiate between the *administration* of the covenant and the covenant itself, which he did earlier on in his book (p. 36). He nevertheless enters dangerous ground by suggesting that the covenant of grace itself encompasses both elect and reprobate seed. That would be a serious perversion of the covenant, for, *per definition*, the covenant is "that arrangement whereby God through grace alone has bound Himself to save man from the just consequences of his sin".[44] The covenant of grace does not comprehend the reprobate. The various *administrations* of the covenant do. The administrations of the covenant are the arrangements through which the elect are called out of the world into the kingdom of God. This is true in the Old Testament dispensation as well as in the New Testament one.

It bears repetition that while the administrations of the covenant comprehend the reprobate as well as the elect, progressive development must be recognised in them. According to prophecy, Israel will give way to the visible churches of the New Testament dispensation. The type will give way to the antitype. Israel as a nation consisted of the reprobate and the elect. The new covenant community is to be made up of people who have "a new heart, a heart of flesh, with a new spirit within them" (Ezek. 36:24-28). They will have God's law in their minds, written on their hearts (Jer. 31:31-34). In practice, we cannot avoid the unwitting admittance of some who are unregenerate into church membership. But that is different from rejecting the "gathered church" principle.

11.3.4 Other errors

Truths stand or fall together. That is because all biblical truths are linked together into a system. The pearls in a necklace are linked together. An error in any doctrine of the system will affect immediately those doctrines standing closest in relation to it.

[43] H. Hanko, p. 89.

[44] E. Hulse, *The Testimony of Baptism*, p. 108. For a more comprehensive critique of Hanko, see the author's article, *Hanko's Straw Fortress* at http://www.ghmag.net/articles/2015-articles/20152-hankos-straw-fortress/.

An erroneous view of the covenant of grace affects the gospel in a direct way. The belief that God saves "in the line of generations" carries the implication that the way of salvation is different for "covenant children" as compared to others. The universality and seriousness of original sin will of necessity be toned down because there exists this category of people who are born into the covenant, and are either already regenerate or prospectively regenerate, while some are unregenerate. Instead of proclaiming the gospel to such "covenant children" and praying for their salvation, the emphasis is shifted to educating them, as though sinners can be *educated* into the kingdom of God! It is claimed that these "covenant children" are saved by the grace of God, while silence is maintained over the necessity of repentance and faith. The gospel is thus distorted by the under-emphasis of original sin and "justification by faith". It has been forgotten that the watchwords of the Reformation were "sola scriptura", "sola gratia", *and* "sola fide"!

Strange enough, most paedobaptist churches do not think it is inconsistent for them not to allow these "covenant children" to partake in the Lord's Supper, until they arrive at "the age of discretion". What is this "age of discretion"? It is something that is arbitrarily introduced without the sanction of Scripture. When any of these "covenant children" does get converted, he is denied biblical baptism because he has been "baptised" at infancy already. Instead of baptism, it is required of him to undergo the rite of "confirmation", which again finds no warrant in Scripture. Many prominent paedobaptists have admitted that there is no command or example given in Scripture for infant baptism, yet all paedobaptists continue the practice on the basis of an artificial and intricate piece of philosophical argument that is built around the covenant God made with Abraham. Hear what the paedobaptists John Murray, B. B. Warfield, and Louis Berkhof say, respectively, about infant baptism:

> "It is only too apparent that if we had an express command or even a proven case with apostolic sanction, then the controversy would not have arisen."[45]

> "There is no express command to baptise infants in the New Testament, and no express record of the baptism of infants."[46]

> "It may be said at the outset that there is no explicit command in the Bible to baptise children, and that there is not a single instance in which we are plainly told that children were baptised."[47]

As noted already, the meaning of baptism is distorted from being a sign of regeneration, faith in Christ, and consecration to walk in newness of life, to being a sign of covenant membership. Furthermore, sprinkling is introduced as the mode of baptism, and this for the sake of convenience.[48] This is done despite the admission by many paedobaptists that immersion is the biblical mode. John Calvin and John Owen said, respectively:

> "The very word *baptizo*, however, signifies immerse; and it is certain that immersion was the practice of the ancient church."[49]

> "It must not be denied but that in primitive times they did use to baptise both grown persons and children by dipping,..."[50]

The church historian, Philip Schaff, wrote: "In England immersion was the normal mode down to the middle of the seventeenth century."[51] The Greek Orthodox Church baptises infants by immersion up to today. Their understanding of the Greek language prevents them from giving to *baptizo* a different meaning than "immersion".[52]

We have seen before how infant baptism is linked with other errors – sacralism, co-operatism, denials of liberty of conscience and freedom of religion, and the repression of "heretics" by force. (See Chapter 3, The Headship of Christ.) Here, we see how it is linked

[45] J. Murray, *Christian Baptism*.
[46] B. B. Warfield, Vol. 9, *Studies in Theology*, p. 395.
[47] L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 632.
[48] E. Hulse, *The Testimony of Baptism*, p. 87.
[49] J. Calvin, *Institutes*, Bk. 4, Ch. 15, paragraph 19.
[50] JO, Vol. 16, p. 267.
[51] P. Schaff, Vol. 7, p. 79.
[52] See the helpful article by Murray Adamthwaite in RT 109, which gives up-to-date information on archaelogical findings and their relation to the mode of baptism.

with more errors – the idea of a visible catholic church; the advocation of a mixed church membership; the distortion of the covenant of grace and the gospel; the introduction of unbiblical beliefs and practices such as an age of discretion, confirmation, and sprinkling; and the denial of biblical baptism to "covenant children" who are converted. It is obvious to us that what paedobaptists have done with regard to infant baptism and the doctrine of the church are exactly what Charles Hodge had said about the relation of the church to the state:

> "...the actual relation between the church and the state is determined historically, i.e., by the course of events, and then a theory invented to explain and justify it..."[53]

The differences between Baptists and paedobaptists on these issues are irreconcilable. It saddens us to think that so many sincere brethren are caught up in such errors. It behoves every believer to be convinced which is the correct teaching of Scripture.

11.4 Controversies Among The Particular Baptists

11.4.1 Attacks from paedobaptists

As far as baptism was concerned, the Baptists in seventeenth century Britain had to face the attacks and misrepresentation against them from paedobaptists of all communions – Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Independents. The Episcopalians were in power from the reign of Elizabeth I to that of Charles I, a period covering the years 1558 to 1643. The Presbyterians came into power from 1643 to 1653. From 1653 to 1660, the Independents gained control. All manner of slander was levelled at the Baptists, of which the Particular Baptists bore the brunt because they were more numerous compared to the General Baptists. They were labelled as "Anabaptists", linking them to the extreme Anabaptists of Münster who, in the year 1536, fought against government forces and were destroyed. When the seven Particular Baptist churches in London issued the 1644 Confession, they added the following disclaimer on the title page:

[53] I. H. Murray, *The Reformation of the Church*, p. 109.

> "The Confession of Faith of those churches which are commonly (though falsely) called Anabaptists; Presented to the view of all that fear God, to examine by the touchstone of the Word of Truth: As likewise for the taking off those aspersions which are frequently both in pulpit and in print (though unjustly) cast upon them."

John Owen himself could not help taking a jab at the Baptists. On the word *baptizo*, he wrote, "Wherefore, in this sense, as the word is applied unto the ordinance, the sense of dipping is utterly excluded. And though as a mere external mode it may be used, provided the person dipped be naked, yet to urge it as necessary overthrows the nature of the sacrament." Affirming that in primitive times people were dipped, he added, "but they affirmed it necessary to dip them stark naked, and that three times..."[54] Owen had obviously read the early church fathers, as his writings frequently reveal. From the time that infant baptism was first introduced in the second century, there had always been congregations that opposed the practice.[55] From the year AD 312, when Constantine legalised Christianity in the Roman Empire, the early church fathers, who belonged to the state-recognised "establishment churches", had been attacking the "dissenting churches" and misrepresenting their practice of immersing believers.[56] Owen was using ammunition from these early writers against the Baptists.

With this background in mind, we would understand why it was that the 1644 Confession had these words added as a footnote in Article 44, on the mode of baptism: "The word *baptizo* signifies to dip or plunge (yet so as convenient garments be both upon the administrator and subject with all modesty.)" The appendix to the 1677 Confession also alludes to the misrepresentation that had been made of the Particular Baptists. (See Appendix B in this book.)

11.4.2 "Open" and "closed" communion

After the Episcopalians were disestablished in 1643, the Baptists defended the baptism of believers by immersion in the atmosphere of

[54] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 266-267.
[55] NIDCC, p. 100.
[56] H. F. Stander and J. P. Louw, *Baptism in the Early Church*, quoted in RT 128.

freedom which they now had. As the number of Baptist congregations multiplied, differences began to arise among them. In the middle years of the seventeenth century a few Particular Baptist congregations began to open their membership to paedobaptists. This led to tension with the other Particular Baptist churches. Differences between the "open communion" churches and the "closed communion" churches continued even after Charles II began to reign in 1660, when the Episcopalians again came to power, and the Nonconformists were again persecuted. John Bunyan wrote in favour of "open membership", while William Kiffin wrote strongly to counter him. This was in the 1670s. The bulk of the Particular Baptist congregations remained united in their stand on the issue, while those who held to Bunyan's position constituted a rather loosely linked company.[57]

In 1677, the Second London Confession of Faith was issued in order to dispel all suspicion of the false charges that had been made against them. For fear of persecution, the compilers did not subscribe their names to it. The introduction of the confession stated that it was a modification of the Westminster Confession and also of the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order, "to convince all that we have no itch to clog religion with new words, but do readily acquiesce in that form of sound words, which hath been in consent with the Holy Scripture, used by others before us." It will be remembered that the Presbyterians were in the ascendency from 1643 to 1653, and the Independents from 1653 to 1660. The Westminster Confession and the Savoy Declaration, drawn up by the Presbyterians and the Independents, respectively, had been received as expressions of orthodox Christianity.

The Confession of Faith of 1677 also contained an appendix in which the Particular Baptist position on baptism was clearly and graciously argued out from Scripture. The spirit was conciliatory throughout, expressing a desire for paedobaptist brethren to have a like attitude towards the Baptists. Of immediate interest to us is a paragraph towards the end of the appendix, which says:

> "We are not insensible that as to the order of God's house, and *entire communion* therein, there are some things wherein

[57] B. R. White, *Open and Closed Membership*.

> we (as well as others) are not at a full accord among ourselves; as for instance the known principle and state of the consciences of diverse of us that have agreed in this Confession is such that we cannot hold *church-communion* with any other than baptized believers, and churches constituted of such; yet some others of us have a greater liberty and freedom in our spirits that way; and therefore we have purposely omitted the mention of things of that nature, that we might concur in giving this evidence of our agreement, both among ourselves and with other good Christians, in those important articles of the Christian religion mainly insisted among us." (Italics added.)

This statement has today been interpreted by some to mean that the Particular Baptists had softened in their view on "the terms of communion (here, meaning the Lord's Table)", compared to their position in the 1644 Confession, when it was required by them that a person be baptised before being admitted to the Lord's table.[58,59] It is the contention of this writer that that is a wrong understanding of its original import. Two considerations will help us to determine the more likely meaning of that paragraph.

First, we must note that the word "communion", as used in the appendix of the confession, appears to carry the broader meaning of "fellowship" rather than the narrower meaning of "partaking in the Lord's Supper", although the former meaning would encompass the latter as well. If that was indeed the case, the term "church communion" would mean "church fellowship" or "Christian fellowship". This would cover such matters as the admission of individuals into church membership, participation in the Lord's Supper, and inter-church fellowship – the very matters, as we shall see, that constituted the problems faced by the Particular Baptists.

Two quotes from John Bunyan's writings on the baptism controversy would point to the correctness of this understanding of the terms "communion" and "church communion". In one case, he wrote,"...by the word *communion* I mean fellowship in the things of the kingdom of Christ, or that which is commonly called *church communion, the communion of saints*;..."[60] Another instance shows

[58] M. Haykin, RT 119.
[59] P. Naylor, p. 89.

the use of the word with reference to church membership: ".. the Church of Christ hath not warrant to keep out of their *communion* the Christian that is discovered to be a visible saint by the word, the Christian that walketh according to his light with God.[61] John Owen also used the word "communion" to mean fellowship, and not the Lord's Supper.[62]

Secondly, we must bear in mind the problems that had arisen among the Particular Baptists over the issue of baptism. The bulk of the Particular Baptists were unhappy with those who espoused "open membership" and "open Lord's Table". The identifiable Particular Baptist body which cooperated together before 1660 censured those erring congregations.[57] The "open" churches were obviously not among those who issued the Confession in 1677. Those who issued the 1677 Confession remained "closed" churches up to 1689 and well beyond that.[63] The issue with them was not that they countenanced "open" policies. Rather they were disagreed among themselves with regard to how to deal with the problems that had arisen because of the "open" churches. It is known that the following differences of opinion existed among them:

i Some of them felt that it was alright to fellowship with the "open" churches, while the others thought otherwise[64]

ii There were some "closed" churches that were more rigid than others, and refused to fellowship with other "closed" churches that did interact with "open" churches. Here was some kind of "second degree separation" operating![65]

iii There was disagreement over whether it was lawful to listen to preachers who did not share in their "closed communion" convictions;[66]

iv There was disagreement over whether those baptized in an "open" church needed to be re-baptized before being admitted into a "closed" church.[67]

[60] J. Bunyan, *A Reason of my Practice in Worship*, in *A Treasury of Bunyan*, p. 825.

[61] J. Bunyan, *Differences in Judgement about Water Baptism No Bar to Communion*, in *A Treasury of Bunyan*, p. 841.

[62] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 18, 183ff.

We conclude from these that those who issued the 1677 Confession were simply stating in the appendix their deliberate omission of matters relating to Christian fellowship with unbaptized believers and with "open" churches. They were themselves "closed" churches, believing in "closed membership" and "closed Lord's Supper". This explanation is more consistent with:

1. The fact that the confession was "put forth by the elders and brethren of many congregations of Christians (baptized upon profession of their faith) in London and the country". These words in the preface to the Confession show that they were all "closed membership" churches, which at that time practised a closed Lord's Table.

2. The content of the confession, which teaches a "closed membership" view which, as mentioned already, meant also a "closed Lord's Table" (Chapter 29, paragraph 4).

3. The fact that the purpose of the appendix was to explain the view of the compilers on baptism, over against the view of the paedobaptists. This was necessary because the Particular Baptists could not admit the paedobaptist brethren to the Lord's Table.

Following the Revolution of 1688, a new era of liberty dawned. In July, 1689, representatives of more than a hundred Particular Baptist churches met in London. Thirty-seven leading men signed, on behalf of the whole assembly, to adopt the 1677 Confession of Faith. It is significant that of the thirty-seven signatories, only one is known with any certainty to be from an "open" church. This church, from *Broadmead*, was printed in italics in the original Confession, whereas all the other churches were printed in plain texts. Could this be to indicate that the said church was the only "open" church present? And could there be more to it than just merely an indication of that fact?

[57] B. R. White, *Open and Closed Membership*.
[63] B. R. White, *Open and Closed Membership*, p. 332.
[64] B. R. White, *The Organisation of the Particular Baptists*, p. 215.
[65] B. R. White, *The Organisation of the Particular Baptists*, pp. 215-216.
[66] B. R. White, *The Organisation of the Particular Baptists*, pp. 213, 234.
[67] B. R. White, *The Organisation of the Particular Baptists*, p. 219.

B. A. Ramsbottom is of the opinion that "open" churches were not invited at all to the Assembly.[68] Assuming B. R. White to be correct, that the Broadmead church was "open",[57] it would mean that either selective invitations were sent out to the "open" churches, or all the "open" churches were invited but none came apart from the one at Broadmead, and perhaps one or two other places. What is certain is that the Confession was issued by mainly the "closed" churches. The appendix of the 1677 Confession was omitted from the 1689 issue of the Confession. In the "Narrative of the Proceedings of the Assembly", the official report of the 1689 meetings, is found a paragraph which reads:

> "In those things wherein one church differs from another in their principles or practices, in point of communion, that we cannot, shall not impose upon any particular church therein, but leave every church their own liberty to walk together as they have received from the Lord."[69]

The similarity of language compared with the paragraph contained in the appendix of the 1677 Confession, which we have discussed above, would require that we understand the present paragraph of 1689 in the same light. In other words, those who signed the 1689 Confession remained "closed membership" and "closed Lord's Table", with the exception of the Broadmead church. There was no change in the view of the bulk of the Particular Baptists right up to the year 1689. The inclusion of the Broadmead church should not have alarmed anyone. Even in 1677, those who issued the Confession were prepared to allow for differences on fellowship with the "open" churches. Now, in 1689, they were prepared to issue the Confession jointly with the open churches. The Confession itself expresses a "closed membership" and a "closed Lord's Table" view, although the latter could have been more explicitly stated. The "open" Broadmead church must have felt that its basic position was "closed membership", so that it had no problem signing the Confession, although it was prepared to admit paedobaptists into membership and the Lord's Table.

[57] B. R. White, *Open and Closed Membership*.
[68] B. A. Ramsbottom, pp. 82-83.
[69] R. W. Oliver, p. 21.

To summarise, we note that the omission of the earlier appendix, and the inclusion of the Broadmead church as one of the signatories, in the 1689 Confession, should not be interpreted as a change on the part of the Particular Baptist churches with regard to their *stand* on membership and the Lord's Table. At most, we may say that there was a change of *attitude* on the part of the more *rigid* Particular Baptists so that they were prepared to keep their opinion on the "open" churches to themselves. As a body, the Particular Baptists wished to maintain fellowship with paedobaptist brethren, and more so with the "open" Particular Baptist brethren. The admission of the Broadmead church to the Assembly should be seen as an act of condescension on the part of the "closed" churches toward the "open" churches. An act of condescension should not be interpreted as an act of advocation. The Confession was not advocating "open" policies.[70]

11.4.3 The terms of communion

We continue with our story on the Particular Baptists. The baptism controversy among Particular Baptists in the seventeenth century had to do more with church membership and interchurch fellowship. At that time, "church communion", in the broader sense of the word, was the issue. A similar controversy was to arise a century later, in the 1770s, which had more to do with the Lord's Supper. In this later controversy, "closed communion" and "open communion" would be terms that referred more specifically to the Lord's Supper. The controversy began with the publication of a tract in which were found the following words:

> "I hear that I, and the church under my care, have been severely censured by several of our stricter brethren of the baptist denomination *for admitting paedobaptists to commune with us at the Lord's Table*."[71] (Italics added.)

The question then was over the terms of communion, that is, whether baptism was a pre-requisite to the Lord's Supper. Put an-

[70] This author is aware that the arguments in this section might need revision as new information comes to light. It is doubtful, however, that the main point will be affected, namely, that the 1677/89 Confession was not advocating "open" policies.

other way, the question was whether paedobaptists should be invited to partake in the Lord's Supper. A similar controversy, over the terms of communion, occurred yet again in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.[72] From this last controversy was to develop the situation in which many Particular Baptists practised "closed membership" but "open communion", the most famous and influential of whom was C. H. Spurgeon.[57]

11.5 Baptism, Membership And The Lord's Supper

The struggles of the early Particular Baptists should help us in our churchmanship today. The subject and mode of baptism have practical implications. Should believers who have been baptised as infants be accepted into church membership? Should believers who have been baptised by modes other than immersion be accepted into church membership? We consider each of these questions in turn.

11.5.1 The subject of baptism

The 1689 Confession of Faith is very clear on the subject of baptism. It says in Chapter 29, paragraph 2:

> "Those who do actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to, our Lord Jesus Christ, are the only proper subjects of this ordinance."

It follows from this that infant "baptism" is no baptism to Baptists. Those who refuse to be baptised when they profess conversion would have to be excluded from church membership since Chapter 26, paragraph 6, quoted in an earlier section of this chapter, requires that church members give themselves to the Lord and to one another "in professed subjection to the ordinances of the gospel". The "ordinances" here has a wider reference to all the appointed means of grace, and not just to the two special ordinances of baptism and the

[71] R. W. Oliver, p. 49.
[72] R. W. Oliver, p. 209.
[57] B. R. White, *Open and Closed Membership*.

Lord's Supper, as the Bible references quoted in the original Confession show. These references were Acts 2:41, 42; 5:13, 14; and 2 Corinthians 9:13. Baptism, however, is included, as the Acts 2:41-42 passage shows. The professed believer would not have been accepted into membership because of his refusal to submit to baptism. This was the view expressed in Article 33 of the 1644 Confession.

11.5.2 The mode of baptism

We consider, next, the question, "Should believers who have been baptized by modes other than immersion, namely sprinkling and effusion (that is, pouring), be admitted into church membership?" The 1689 Confession is clear on this, stating in Chapter 29, paragraph 4:

> "Immersion, or dipping of the person in water, is necessary to the due administration of this ordinance."

Again, by virtue of Chapter 26, paragraph 6, of the 1689 Confession, those who had not been baptised by immersion would have been excluded from church membership. This is because the Particular Baptists were of the view that immersion was the only biblical mode of baptism. Articles 33 and 40 of the 1644 Confession also required immersion before church membership.

Difficulties arising from exceptional cases have often been exaggerated. When one *really* cannot be immersed, perhaps because of a bad medical condition, he may be accepted into membership without baptism (cf. Lk. 23:39-43).

11.5.3 The Lord's Supper

Was there inconsistency on the part of people like Spurgeon in opening the Lord's Supper to paedobaptists but maintaining "closed membership"? How did Spurgeon justify such an approach to the Lord's Supper? He did so by declaring thus,

> "...dear to our hearts is that great article of the Apostle's Creed, 'I believe in the communion of saints.' I believe not in the communion of Episcopalians alone, I believe not in the communion of Baptists only,... Whosoever loves the Lord Jesus Christ in verity and truth hath

> a hearty welcome, and is not only permitted, but invited to communion with the Church of Christ."[73]

It was the recognition of the fact that all believers are in fellowship with one another that led to Spurgeon's stand on the Lord's Supper. This is not contradictory to the teaching of the 1689 Confession, which lists, in Chapter 30, paragraph 1, one purpose of this ordinance as "a bond and pledge of their (the participants) communion with Him (Christ), and with each other". The "communion of saints" spoken of by Spurgeon is affirmed in Chapter 27 of the 1689 Confession. Spurgeon, in opening the Lord's Table to believers from other churches, was expressing this communion with such.

Furthermore, Spurgeon could not be accused of acting loose on his church principles. Spurgeon held strongly to "closed membership", recognizing that the expression of fellowship with visiting believers was one thing, and the admission of people into a church-state (that is, the church considered as an organisation) was another. On the same occasion, he declared:

> "Moreover, we are Baptists, and we cannot swerve from this matter of discipline, nor can we make our church half-and-half in that matter. The witness of our church must be one and indivisible. We must have one Lord, one faith, and one baptism."

This did not mean, however, that all and sundry could come to the Table. Rather, believers of other persuasion, from other churches, were meant. In view of the extreme "openness" practised in many churches today, in which all are indiscriminately invited to partake in the Lord's Supper, it seems best to describe the view adopted by Spurgeon as "restricted communion".[74] Spurgeon would have concurred with Chapter 30, paragraph 8, of the 1689 Confession, which states:

> "All ignorant and ungodly persons, as they are unfit to enjoy communion with Christ, so are they unworthy of the Lord's Table, and cannot, without great sin against Him, while they remain such, partake of these holy mysteries, or be admitted thereunto; yea, whosoever shall receive

[73] C. H. Spurgeon, Vol. 2, p. 13.

> unworthily, are guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord, eating and drinking judgment to themselves."

It is to be noted that, in the "restricted communion" view, visitors are not invited to the Lord's Table simply because they have been baptised by a different mode. Strictly, the criterion to determine whether they should be invited is not the mode by which they have been baptised, but their profession of faith and their walk with God. There may be those who have been immersed on profession of faith, but who are walking in a disorderly manner as Christians. Such visitors, if known, would have to be excluded from the Lord's Table despite their correct baptism. The point, then, is that the criterion for inviting visiting believers is not their mode of baptism but their standing before God.

People who hold to "closed membership" and "restricted communion" should not be castigated as inconsistent. The purpose of baptism is initiation into the fellowship of a local church, while one purpose of the Lord's Supper is to express the fellowship that believers have with the Lord Jesus Christ and with one another. An analogy may help. A child who is still in the mother's womb is unable to enjoy fellowship with his parents and brothers and sisters around the dinner table until he is born. So also, a believer may not enjoy the privileges of church membership until he is baptized. A visiting friend, however, may be invited to join the family at the dinner table, although he may believe somewhat differently from the family on certain issues. His presence at the dinner table does not in any way desecrate the privacy and sacredness of the dinner table. So also, when a visiting believer is invited to join in the Lord's Supper the sacredness of this special ordinance of the church is not defiled.

A more difficult situation to consider is the presence of believers who are paedobaptists *by conviction* in the midst of the church. Such believers are not mere visitors, but those who have chosen to attach themselves to the church, perhaps because there is no better one they can go to in the vicinity. The church that upholds the 1689 Confession would not accept such people into membership. The cre-

[74] S. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition*, p. 372. Waldron's chapter on baptism in the said book, together with W. J. Seaton's booklet, *An Introduction to Christian Baptism* (Blue Banner Productions), are sufficient to present the Baptist position on baptism.

ation of an "associate membership" to cater for such individuals is clumsy and unnecessary. It would be mere pragmatism. It would also be against the simplicity of New Testament Christianity. Conditions would have to be imposed upon such "associate members", such as that they are not allowed to vote, or to hold office. This would lead to the creation of a class of "members" who are not truly members, since they do not share in the full privileges, responsibilities and liabilities of church membership.

The practice of the Reformed Baptist churches in Malaysia has been to treat such friends as part of the church, sharing in the life of the church right up to attending the church business meeting as observers. They are encouraged to help in the various church activities, although forbidden to be in charged of any department of gospel work or to vote. These brethren must, of course, have a credible profession of faith and voluntarily agree to be under the oversight of the church.

The questions have been raised – "Would not the opening of the Lord's Table to such paedobaptist brethren, who are not visitors, dilute the witness of the local church in the long run?" "Would not the significance of baptism, the principle of 'the gathered church', and churchmanship in general be compromised?" "Would not such brethren become complacent and take their position in the church for granted?" These are problems that we have to struggle with, to which there are no easy solutions. If anything, we prefer to err on the side of charity than on the side of severity. Perhaps, the solution lies in opening the Lord's Table to such brethren only at fixed intervals, say, once every three months, instead of every time it is held. This assumes, of course, that the church holds the Lord's Supper regularly, be it once a week, once a fortnight, or once a month.

There are some churches today that practise "strict communion" of the kind that excludes even visiting members of a like-minded church, believing that the Lord's Supper is strictly an ordinance of the local church. This view finds no support in Scripture and is, in fact, contrary to the design of the ordinance and to apostolic example (Acts 20:5, 7).

If our understanding of the position of those who signed the 1689 Confession is correct, it may be rightly said that those who practise "closed membership" and "restricted communion" have become more liberal on the terms of communion than their spiritual

forebears. This should not pose too much of a problem because no Reformed Baptists today would treat the Confession as infallible and *on par* with the Bible. It is a document which maintains doctrinal precision with a reasonable degree of fulness. We treat it as a handy reference manual that expresses the system of belief on which our churches are founded. As more light is shed over any issue, we are not afraid to state any adjustment that is needed to the Confession.

11.5.4 Baptism and minors

A church that has been founded for some years will increasingly be faced with the problem of the "second generation". History has shown that there is a tendency for churches to become lax with regard to the baptism of the "second generation". Baptist churches of the past and the present are known to have lapsed from the practice of believer's baptism to that of "adolescence baptism".[75] A large grouping of Baptist churches in Myanmar (formerly Burma) is known to be baptising children of church-going parents who have arrived at age twelve years, regardless of whether or not they have a credible profession of faith. This is no believer's baptism, but "delayed infant baptism"!

We believe that a child can come to personal faith in Christ early in his life. The problem here is to determine the credibility of the child's profession of faith. In other words, the difficulty is for the church to determine at what point in the life of the child the faith that he professes really becomes his own instead of being a mere "extension" of the faith of his parents. Wisdom requires that the church waits for him to reach adolescence before he is baptised. When exactly to baptise is not the crucial matter here. It will vary from child to child. The greater problem before us is that once baptised, the child who is still a minor should rightly be regarded as a church member. In some situations, such children may form a significant proportion of the church membership, in which case there is the danger of the church meeting being dominated by those who are not mature enough to vote wisely. In order to avert this potential problem, some Baptists have argued for not baptising them until they become adults. However, this course of action is opened

[75] D. Kingdon, *Church Discipline Among the Anabaptists*, in *The Way Ahead*, pp. 79-95.

to the following objections: (i) There is no clear biblical teaching as to the age at which adulthood begins. One is reminded here of the problem faced by the paedobaptists in determining the "age of discretion" before allowing their "covenant children" to partake in the Lord's Supper; (ii) If it may be ascertained that the minor child has a credible profession of faith, he is biblically entitled to baptism. There is no good reason to withhold baptism from him.

Those who resort to not baptising minors would argue that there is no recorded instance of such baptism in the Bible. While this may be true, we believe it is not the proper place to begin. It leads to too restricted a view of church membership, in which all members are functioning adults – very much like restricting citizenship in a nation to only those who can bear arms. This would be too narrow a view of church membership, while the paedoabaptist view of "covenant children" would be too broad. We should rather begin with the meaning and purpose of baptism. Even more precisely, we should begin with the "gathered church" principle.

The principle of "the gathered church" requires that only regenerate people, who are capable of committing themselves to the church by covenant, may be admitted as members. Are adolescents of, say, age fourteen or sixteen, capable of covenant commitment? Surely, the answer is in the affirmative. Are we able to determine whether there is a credible profession of faith in adolescence? Surely, again, the answer must be in the affirmative. If so, there is no good reason for withholding baptism, and therefore, church membership also, from such a one.

The next question that arises is whether an adolescent is to share in the full privileges, responsibilities and liabilities of membership. The answer is that since he is a church member, he has, in principle, the right to all those. It may not be wise, however, for him to exercise all his rights immediately. Having *rights* is one thing, the *exercise* of those rights is another. We see this difference operating in other areas of life. A minor who has inherited a large amount of property, for example, will have the *right* or *title* to the inheritance but not the *enjoyment* of that inheritance until he comes of age.

The exercise of those rights will have to be regulated by the office-bearers in conjunction with the church, and in consultation with the believing parents. This is, afterall, the basic duty of elders. Moreover, the many metaphors – a household, a body, a temple, a

building – used to describe the church show that it should be functioning in a dynamic and interactive way towards the well-being of the whole.

The household idea is particularly appropriate with regard to this matter. In the home, parents will wisely assign responsibilities to their children as they are able to handle them. A child of twelve years old may be asked to sweep the floor, but not to boil a kettle of water. A child of fourteen may be asked to boil water, but not to chop firewood. A child of sixteen may be asked not only to chop firewood but also be given responsibility over the whole house in the absence of the parents. In the church, a child who is accepted for baptism and church membership should normally be able to take part in the Lord's Supper. He may perhaps be ready to be invited to sit in and observe the proceedings of a church meeting, but he may not be ready to vote wisely. The time will come when he will be allowed to exercise the full rights of church membership.

Children mature at different ages. No fixed age should be set for children to be assigned any responsibility, in the same way that no two adult members should be given the same responsibility simply because they are adults. Gifts and abilities differ even among adults, let alone children. Each child has to be assessed on his own merits. A wise eldership would want to stretch the capabilities of the children in the church so that they develop and mature early, yet without overstretching them so that they break.

11.6 Summary

1 The principle of "the gathered church" arises from a consideration of the essence of the church, which consists of two elements – the *matter* and the *form*. As far as the matter is concerned, the church is to be made up of true believers, who have a credible profession of faith and holiness of life. The form of the church requires the members' voluntary consent, covenant commitment, and the exercise of church discipline. The principle of "the gathered church" may be stated as follows – 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 disci-

pline, of the gospel.

2 A church that has only an implicit covenant is still a true church as long as the marks of one are present – the proclamation of the gospel, the administration of the ordinances, and the exercise of discipline. Underlying these must be the characteristics of the true church, namely – unity, sanctity, catholicity, apostolicity, and perpetuity. A church that has only an implicit covenant is defective in its understanding of the local church. The more explicit is the covenant in a church, the more it will glorify Christ and experience His blessings.

3 Ideally, there should be a minimum of ten wage-earning members in a church for it to be viable. However, we should not be too scrupulous about the minimum number of people needed before a church is constituted. Far better it is to constitute a group of five persons into a church, and request the help of an established church to provide the pastoral oversight, than to allow the group to remain incoherent in a hostile world.

4 The "gathered church" principle is upheld in Congregationalism and Independency. Historically, the Independents consisted of those who were paedobaptists, who were called by that name, and the Particular Baptists who believed in the baptism of believers by immersion. Infant baptism is contrary to the "gathered church" principle because it is 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.

5 Episcopalians and Presbyterians are paedobaptists. They have developed a theology of infant baptism that revolves around the covenant God made with Abraham. In this paedobaptist theology, circumcision is wrongly identified with baptism, instead of with regeneration, as is taught in the New Testament (e.g. Col. 2:11-12). They have come up with 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. The basic problem with the paedobap-

tists is their adoption of a "flat theology", in which the progressive nature of biblical revelation is not consistently recognised.

6 In their attempt to create a theology of infant baptism, the paedobaptists have distorted the true covenant theology and added a host of other errors to it. The idea of federalism, the covenant of grace, the gospel itself, and the meaning and purpose of baptism, have all been distorted. The adoption of a mixed church membership has necessitated the invention of "the age of accountability", "confirmation", and the denial of biblical baptism to those who have been "baptised" in infancy. Sprinkling has also been introduced as the mode of baptism.

7 The controversies experienced by the Particular Baptists through the centuries over baptism, church membership, and the Lord's Supper, should help Reformed Baptists today in their churchmanship. The principle of "the gathered church" requires that only believers who have been immersed should be accepted as members of the church. The *communion of the saints* would require that we invite visiting believers to the Lord's Table, regardless of their convictions on the mode of baptism. There are differences of opinion about this, however, among Reformed Baptists.

8 When a credible profession is seen in an adolescent, he may be baptised and accepted into church membership. The church, under the guidance of the elders, and by consultation with the parents, may determine when the adolescent should take on what responsilities. Each minor should be assessed on his own merits.

Twelve

THE COMMUNION OF CHURCHES

To the uninitiated, the very name of "Independency" might convey the wrong idea that churches holding to this form of church government are necessarily isolationist – each carrying out its own activities without reference to others, and with no concern as to the consequences of its actions upon others. Indeed, this is one of many similar charges that has been levelled at Independency by its opponents. This, however, is far from the truth. The principle of "the communion of churches" is recognised in Independency, and is worked out in its own unique way.

If Independency is the form of church government taught in the Scripture, the allegations made against it will not stand. A divinely ordained system cannot be wrong. It cannot be weak. It can only be misunderstood or misapplied. As will be shown, "the communion of churches" is, strictly speaking, not of the essence of church government. The topic falls under the broader category of "church polity" and, consequently, may be rightfully treated here.

12.1 The Nature Of Communion

12.1.1 Its essence

Communion, or fellowship, between churches arises from their spiritual union with Jesus Christ. Just as believers are individually united to Christ by faith, so also churches are each united to Jesus Christ by the faith of the members corporately expressed. Faith in Christ leads to love for one another (Gal. 5:6; Col. 1:4; Jn. 13:34; 1 Jn. 4:7-11). Love, in turn, leads to mutual care and concern which, when expressed, constitutes fellowship. Let us develop these thoughts further.

There are three persons in the godhead – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each person is completely God. Yet. there is only one God and not three. Each person is distinct from the other two, yet they are inseparably united. Where the Holy Spirit is, Christ is also. For this reason, Christ could tell His disciples that He was going away, and in the next breath said that He would come to them (John 14:16-18). He was going to be present with them by His Spirit. Where Christ is, the Father is. The Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father (John 14:18; 17:21). The presence of one person of the godhead involves the presence of the other two. This is what has traditionally been called "the co-inherence of the divine persons".

A believer is indwelt by the Spirit of Christ (1 Cor. 6:19-20). A local church is also indwelt by the Spirit of Christ (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16). Since Christ is in His disciples, the Father is also in them (John 17:23). It follows that all three persons of the godhead are present in the believer, and in the local church. Christ prayed for His followers to be "made perfect in one, so that the world may know... (John 17:23)".

The spiritual union of believers with Christ must be manifested by their gathering into visible local churches. As a separated people, covenanted into a local church together, believers express their fellowship with one another (1 Jn. 1:7; 2 Cor. 8:5). In local churches, the communion of saints come to its fullest and clearest expression. In the context of the gathered church Christ promised that, "where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them (Mt. 18:15-20)".

A form of government is superimposed upon the communion of believers in a local church. The keys of the kingdom of heaven are given to the church, to be exercised by the appointed elders (Mt. 16:19; 18:15-20). Each local church is complete in itself in terms of its polity and government. Together, local churches throughout the world, and throughout the ages, form the body of Christ. As local churches conform more and more to God's word, Christ is perfecting His body – the universal church (Eph. 5:26-27).

No government over a number of local churches, of any sort, has been revealed in Scripture. The seven golden lampstands in Revelation 1 are not physically linked together, which speaks of their independency as far as organisation or government is concerned. They are spiritually linked together by the presence of the Son of God, who is found in the midst of them (Rev. 1:13). Gathered churches must express their fellowship visibly with one another – not by forming themselves into denominations, not by uniting cross-denominationally under an umbrella organisation – but in ways that express their spiritual unity with one another. Sufficient light is shed in the New Testament on how this may be accomplished.

The communion of churches arises from their union with Christ, and therefore with one another. Spiritual union with Christ is the *ground* of communion, love is the *bond* of communion. Communion is not of the essence of government.

12.1.2 Its expression

John Owen defines the communion of churches as "their joint actings in the same gospel duties towards God in Christ, with their mutual actings towards each other with respect unto the end of their institution and being, which is the glory of Christ in the edification of the whole catholic church."[1] Thus, there are two aspects to the communion of churches. Abstractly considered, it is the execution of gospel duties by the individual churches. Practically considered, it is the mutual interactions of the churches to advance the cause of Christ and edify the whole catholic church. We consider these aspects of the communion of churches in turn.

[1] JO, Vol. 16, p. 191.

As individual churches carry out their gospel duties, the communion of churches is being expressed. By so doing, church communion that transcends denominational structures becomes a reality. Such communion exists when each church proclaims the same truth, administers the same ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, engages in prayer to the same God, professes subjection to the authority of Christ in all things, and has the welfare of the universal body of Christ at heart.[2] Conversely, no communion exists between churches that are faithful and those that have departed from the truth and, thereby, become veritable synagogues of Satan (Rev. 2:9; 3:9).

Each local church must strive to be as closely conformed to the ideal church as possible. Each church must also recognise that no church in this world is perfect. There should be mutual respect and love between all churches that hold to the fundamentals of the Christian faith (1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 4:4-6). There should also be separation from churches that wilfully propagate dangerous errors or damnable heresies (Gal. 1:6-10; 2 Cor. 6:11-18; Jude 3; etc.). This leads us to consider the second way by which the communion of churches is expressed.

The communion of churches should also be expressed by outward acts that proceed from mutual love forged by union with Christ. This second aspect of the communion of churches is often called *interchurch fellowship*. The New Testament reveals that churches in apostolic times engaged in interchurch fellowship by various means – by sending relief funds (Acts 11:27-30; 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8, 9); in the encouragement given to new churches (Acts 11:9-22); by loaning preachers and teachers of the word (Acts 11:25- 26); by cooperation in missions in terms of personnel and funds (Acts 16:1-5; Phil. 1:3-5; 2:25-30; 4:15-16; Col. 1:7); by communications with one another through visits and letters (1 Cor. 1:11; Col. 4.16); by consultation to redress wrongs and advise on difficulties (Acts 15:24, 28-29); etc.

Through the passage of time, churches have multiplied, at the same time that differences in belief and practice have increased. It is practically impossible for one church to have direct fellowship with every other church due to geographical distance, political hin-

[2] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 191-194.

drances, the numerous churches there are around, and differences in doctrine and practice. Moreover, our life-span is short, and our resources are limited. Of necessity, a church has to be selective in its attempts to forge fellowship with other churches.

It is not wrong to be selective in fellowship. The Lord Himself practised selective fellowship – from the multitude of followers to the seventy who were chosen to go out two by two; from the seventy to the twelve who became his disciples; from the twelve to the three who accompanied Him to the Mount of Transfiguration and the Garden of Gethsemane; from the three to the disciple whom He loved. In principle, church fellowship should transcend denomination. In practice, selective fellowship often means that the inner circle of churches involved will be those of the same denomination in a given locality. Nevertheless, as opportunity permits, and as providence directs, fellowship with other churches should be engaged in.

The more complex circumstances that we are in today also warrants a more organised or methodical approach towards expressing and promoting interchurch fellowship. A proper understanding of "the regulative principle" will help us determine the true bounds of freedom in this area. Nothing is to be introduced into the worship of God and the government of His church except those that are expressly taught in the Scripture. There are, however, matters not specifically taught in God's word which must nevertheless be done in accordance to the general rules of Scripture. The 1689 Confession says, in Chapter 1, paragraph 6, "...we acknowledge ...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." For example, it is recorded in the Scripture that the early believers met together on the first day of the week for worship (e.g. Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 16:2). We are not told, however, whether they met at exactly the same time every Lord's Day. Yet, today, every church fixes a definite time for the gathering of believers for worship.

Equally, it is not wrong for a group of churches to definitely associate together, and to arrange for fixed times of meeting together. All things are to be done "decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40), consistent with the character of God. Good stewardship of our time

demands that we organise ourselves and be methodical in our approach. The apostle Paul had a definite policy of organising missions, and of sharing resources, personnel, and information. Churches today cannot afford to do less. John Owen warned against churches that operate independently without reference to the welfare of the church catholic, saying:

> "No church is so independent as that it can always and in all cases observe the duties it owes unto the Lord Christ and the church catholic, by all those powers which it is able to act in itself distinctly, without conjunction with others. And the church that confines its duty unto the acts of its own assemblies cuts itself off from the external communion of the church catholic; nor will it be safe for any man to commit the conduct of his soul to such a church."[3]

Nevertheless, in the midst of expressing fellowship with other churches, the autonomy of the local church must be guarded. The expression of church communion must not be allowed to intrude into the government of the church. Also, the welfare, faithfulness, and purity of the local church must not be sacrificed at the altar of obsession with interchurch fellowship. One church may leave it to providence for opportunities of fellowship. Another may deliberately organise opportunities of fellowship. The former is able to avoid the liabilities of the latter, but it also misses out on the blessings that come to the latter. The spirit of the latter church is more genial and enterprising, and, we dare say, more biblical (1 Sam. 2:30; Mt. 25:14-30; 1 Pet. 2:17).

In fact, the Scripture sheds enough light on this matter so that we are left with the distinct impression of the necessity for churches in a region to definitely associate together. We read of "the churches of Asia", "the churches of Macedonia", and "the churches of Galatia" (1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Cor. 8:1; Gal. 1:2). The *churches* (plural, 2 Cor. 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 (Col. 4:16;

[3] JO, Vol. 16, p. 196.

Rev. 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, of which we have more to say later (Acts 15). We are inclined to think that the regional association of churches, in the words of John Owen, "hath the force of a divine institution."[4]

12.2 Associations Of Churches

How are churches to express their fellowship with one another? What power does an association have? How organised should the association of the churches be? How extensive, geographically and numerically, should such fellowship be? What advantages are there in associating together? These are the questions we shall attempt to answer.

12.2.1 Associations and messengers

The 1689 Confession states, in Chapter 26, paragraph 14, that "... churches ...ought to hold communion among themselves, for their peace, increase in love, and mutual edification." Churches jointly engaged in some gospel enterprise or other acts of fellowship will naturally involve their church members. There is, however, the more formal expression of church communion in which the messengers, or delegates, of the churches meet. These messengers should be elders of the churches plus other men, if any, who are approved by the churches (cf. Acts 15:2, 7). John Owen said,

> "Of these delegates and messengers of the churches, the elders or officers of them, or some of them at least, ought to be the principal; for there is a peculiar care of public edification incumbent on them, which they are to exercise on all just occasions. They are justly presumed to know best the state of their own churches, and to be best able to judge of matters under consideration; and they do better represent the churches from whom they are sent than any private brethren can do, and so receive that

[4] JO, Vol. 16, p. 197.

> respect and reverence which is due to the churches themselves; as also, they are most meet to report and recommend the synodal determinations unto their churches; and a contrary practice would quickly introduce confusion.
>
> But yet it is not necessary that they alone should be sent or delegated by the churches, but they may have others joined with them, and had so until prelatical usurpation overturned their liberties. So there were others besides Paul and Barnabas sent from Antioch to Jerusalem; and the brethren of that church, whatever is impudently pretended to the contrary, concurred in the decree and the determination there made."[5]

Owen chose to call the meeting of such messengers a "synod", as does the Savoy Platform of Church Polity. The 1689 Confession of Faith avoids using this word altogether, presumably because of its Presbyterian connotation.[6] The basic ideas involved are the same, however. Churches should associate together by sending messengers to meet regularly. The messengers must primarily be church elders, although other members may also be chosen. Elders, and especially ministers, should be the leaders and spokesmen of the church in ecclesiastical matters.

The Particular Baptists worked out their understanding of church communion by organising themselves into regional "associations" of churches in which their messengers met regularly.[7] This manner of associating together was unique to the Independents, among whom the Particular Baptists set the more consistent example.[8] It had the advantage of practically expressing fellowship among the churches without intruding into the government of the local congregations. It conformed more to what appeared to be the New Testament pattern of fellowship between churches (Gal. 1:2; Col. 4:16; Rev. 1:4; Acts 16:1-2, etc.). Many local associations were already established by

[5] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 204-205.

[6] This is clear from the following quote: "Bishops and Puritans entered into debate on disputed matters, the King (James I) acting as chairman. But one of the Puritans happened to use the term, "synod" and this, because it savoured of Presbyterianism, caused His Majesty to break out into a violent temper..." S. M. Houghton, *Sketches*, p. 150.

the mid-seventeenth century – years before the 1677/89 Confession was drawn up.[7] The First London Confession of Faith of 1644 states, in Article 17:

> "And although the particular congregations be distinct, and several bodies, every one as a compact and knit city within itself; yet are they all to walk by one rule of truth; so also they (by all means convenient) are to have the counsel and help one of another, if necessity require it, as members of one body, in the common faith, under Christ their head."

Churches that normally meet in different associations may come together in a general assembly as and when the need arises. This was advocated by John Owen, and was practised by the early Particular Baptists from 1689 to 1692, when the fire of persecution against the Nonconformists died out.[9] In Owen's view, messengers of regional associations are to meet "frequently",[10] while a general assembly is to meet "if occasion require and it be expedient."[11]

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). Often it is that the formation of regional associations, or the calling of a general assembly, is initiated by such churches. Again, we quote John Owen:

> "We do believe that the mutual communion of particular churches amongst themselves, in an equality of power and order, *though not of gifts and usefulness*, is the only

[7] B. R. White, *Organisation*. Regional associations of churches continued to be formed right through to the eighteenth century. The Northamptonshire Baptist Association, which sent out William Carey as a missionary to India, was formed in 1764. There were a total of six known Particular Baptist Associations in England at the end of the century. See *William Carey*, by S. Pearce Carey, p. 84.

[8] The paedobaptist Independents in the London area united with the Presbyterians in "the Happy Union" of 1691. After just a few years, this union broke down. The reason there was the same as elsewhere, namely the tension between the power of synods and the authority of the local church. See K. W. H. Howard, pp. 144, 157, 259-261. The Particular Baptists never had such problems; their problems were of a different nature. See R. W. Oliver.

[9] R. W. Oliver, p. 13.

[10] JO, Vol. 16, p. 199.

[11] JO, Vol. 16, p. 202.

> way appointed by our Lord Jesus Christ, after the death of the apostles, for attaining the general end of all particular churches, which is the edification of the church catholic, in faith, love, and peace."[12] (Italics added.)

John Owen was himself providentially gifted and placed in such a way that he was able to be of great help to the Nonconformist cause in his days.[13] One opponent described him as "the Prince, the oracle, the Metropolitan of Independency", stating that the Independent churches maintained contact and passed news by means of lines of communication established originally at the Savoy Assembly in 1658.[14] Among the Particular Baptists, there existed an intimate group identity led by some churches in London.[7] Men like William Kiffin, Hansard Knollys and Benjamin Keach were notable leaders. They were the ones who, together with four other ministers, on behalf of the London churches, called for the General Assembly of 1689.[15]

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. The situation may unwittingly arise in which the affiliated churches continue to support gospel enterprises initiated by the stronger church so that the strong gets stronger, while the weak get weaker. Discontent and unhappiness will be fomented. The aim of edifying every church concerned would have been defeated. To avoid this danger, the stronger church should endeavour to involve the other churches as much as possible in all aspects of gospel enterprises. Just as the responsibilities and liabilities of associating together are shared out, so also the privileges and blessings must be 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.

[12] JO, Vol. 16, p. 185.
[13] P. Toon, Chapters 6 & 7.
[14] P. Toon, p. 160.
[7] B. R. White, *Organisation*.
[15] A. C. Underwood, p. 129.

12.2.2 The power of associations

Since communion is not of the essence of government, the voluntary nature of all actions constituting interchurch fellowship should be guarded. The calling of associational meetings and general assemblies is nothing but the voluntary consent of the churches concerned to meet together by their delegates and messengers, for the ends declared above.[16] The agreement by a group of churches to be associated is itself a voluntary matter. Messengers in assembly are not vested with the power to impose their views, findings, or conclusions upon the member churches. The power of an assembly of messengers is only advisory, and not authoritative or judicial. This is clearly stated in Chapter 26, paragraph 15, of the 1689 Confession of Faith, which we quote in full:

> "In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or administration, wherein either the churches in general are concerned, or any one church, in their peace, union, and edification; or any member or members of any church are injured, in or by any proceedings in censures not agreeable to truth and order: it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do, by their messengers, meet to consider, and give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned; howbeit these messengers assembled, are not intrusted with any church-power properly so called; or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons; or to impose their determination on the churches or officers."

At this juncture, it may be asked what good may be accomplished if an association has no power of rule over its member churches. The council of Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15 answers this clearly:[17]

i The occasion of it was a difference in the church of Antioch, caused by some individuals who came from the church in Jerusalem, claiming the authority of the apostles (vv. 1, 24).

[16] JO, Vol. 16, p. 205.
[17] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 207-208.

ii The means of its resolution was the voluntary reference of the matter made by the church at Antioch to the church of Jerusalem. The church at Antioch was not summoned by the church at Jerusalem to meet, as the Episcopalians would like us to believe.

iii The persons constituting the gathering were the apostles and elders of the church at Jerusalem, and the messengers of that of Antioch, among whom were Paul and Barnabas (vv. 2, 6). No elders or representatives of other churches were present, as the Presbyterians would like us to believe. This was no synod of the Presbyterian sense.

iv The matter under contention was discussed by reference to the Scripture, and the mind of God on it was adduced out of Scripture.

v The power of the assembly was declarative. Nothing new was imposed upon the churches. Direction was given with regard to those things particularly relevant to the Gentile churches, which they were already practising, namely to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, or from blood. The first two items were moral in nature, which all the churches would have agreed with. The last two had to do with the liberty of the Gentile Christians, which they must withhold to avoid offending the conscience of Jewish Christians in their midst. These were duties known to the churches and already in practice among all, except now it was declared unto them.

vi The grounds on which the assembly proposed the reception of, and compliance with, its decrees were four – (a) That what they had determined was the mind of the Holy Spirit, as determined from Scripture: "...it seemed good to the Holy Spirit (v. 28)"; (b) The authority of the assembly, as convened in the name of Christ and by virtue of His presence: "...it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, *and us*"; (c) That the things which they had determined were "necessary", i.e. that were already in practice among them even before this time, namely abstaining from the use of their liberty in things indifferent to avoid scandal; and (d) From the

duty to maintain peace and fellowship between the Jewish and Gentile churches (vv. 19-21).

It is to be noted that the decree ended with the words, "If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well." There is nothing authoritative by way of jurisdiction. The authority was doctrinal in nature. If the churches were persuaded, it would have been by the force of truth, not by the authority of the council over them.

12.2.3 Organisation and associations

The formation of an "association", according to the modern meaning of the word, inevitably involves organisation and structure. Office-bearers, whether of a temporary or permanent tenure, will have to be appointed. Rules and regulations will have to be agreed upon. A constitution will have to be drawn up. As the association gets bigger and more complex, there will be the tendency for it to usurp the role and functions of the local churches represented.

Worse, an association may take upon itself governmental or judicial power over the churches represented. When this happens, the association would have strayed from the purpose for which it was first established. The history of many Baptist associations and conventions has proved that this is a very real danger. The member churches are autonomous only on paper, but not in practice. Much time and effort are channelled to sustain and perpetuate the association or convention, instead of it acting only as a platform of fellowship.

While a fully-fledged association has many dangers, it is to be recognised that some degree of organising is needed for there to be meaningful fellowship between churches. The early Particular Baptist associations, for example, had articles of agreement on doctrine and practice which they drew up for themselves.[7] What needs to be kept in mind is the purpose for which all efforts at organisation are directed. All efforts made should be aimed at expressing fellowship "for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification", and not at the creation of an organisation *per se*. Clearly, fellowship is achievable without there being an "association" in the modern sense of the word.

It is to be noted, however, that a grouping of churches in fellowship with one another may call itself an "association", as was the case with the early Particular Baptists, without carrying with it the idea of a heavily structured organisation. Equally, names such as "fellowship", "convention", "council", "board", or "fraternal" may be used without any implication of an organisation. The experiences of the early Particular Baptists in London are instructive. From the early seventeenth century the churches were already in close association with one another. They were the ones who issued the 1644 Confession. They were the ones who called for the General Assembly of all the Particular Baptist churches throughout Britain in I689. From 1689 to 1692, the General Assembly met annually. In the last meeting of 1692, it was agreed that the Assembly should split into two due to the difficulty of travel in those days. From 1693, one group met in Bristol and became the Western Association. The group in London met for a time but the meetings soon ceased. An attempt to revive the London Association was made in 1704 which survived ten years. From 1714, the churches in London continued to associate through a ministers' fraternal which they called the Baptist Board.[18] This was not a loose fraternal of the sort encountered today in which ministers of various denominations gather for fellowship, prayer, and mutual encouragement. The Baptist Board obviously operated with objectives that were clearer and surer, and that knitted the churches closely together in true fellowship and gospel enterprises.[7]

12.2.4 The extent of fellowship

We answer, next, the question of how extensive – geographically and numerically – church fellowship should be. In principle, there is no limit to the area covered by, and the number of churches involved in, church fellowship. Just as the preaching of the gospel is not confined to geographical areas, so also the fellowship of believers and churches is not confined to geographical areas. The world is our mission field, the world is also our parish.

In this age of advanced communications and transportation, more extensive fellowship is possible. Nevertheless, for regular and mean-

[7] B. R. White, *Organisation*.
[18] A. C. Underwood, pp. 130-131.

ingful expressions of fellowship within the constraints of money, convenience, political hindrances, etc., regional groupings of churches are more realistic. Also, the purpose for which a meeting is convened, or an association formed, may limit participation to certain churches. In the words of John Owen, "concernment and convenience" determine the extent or measure of fellowship between churches.[19]

In a situation like Malaysia in which Reformed Baptist work is relatively new, the few churches scattered throughout the country would need to fellowship with one another as a body. Conceivably, the time may come when regional associations are formed throughout the country, without any church feeling constrained to fellowship only within its own association.

12.2.5 The advantages of associations

Many advantages accrue from fellowship between churches. We have noted how the early churches co-operated positively together in many gospel enterprises and in mutual help and encouragement. John Owen stated that the general end of church association is the edification of the whole body or church catholic. This was followed by a list of objectives:[10]

i To prevent divisions arising from differences in judgment and practice, such as happened between the churches of Antioch and Jerusalem (Acts 15);

ii To avoid or remove offences against mutual love among the churches;

iii To advance the light of the gospel by a joint confession and agreement in the faith;

iv To give a concurrent testimony against pernicious heresies or errors, by which the faith of any is overthrown, or in danger of being overthrown;

v To put right, through advice, any who may have been unjustly cast out of the church;

[19] JO, Vol. 16, pp. 199-200.
[10] JO, Vol. 16, p. 199.

vi To restore a church that might be straying, or has strayed, from the truth in terms of doctrine or practice.[20]

The objectives of associating together are, thus, both positive and negative – to further the cause of Christ, and to put right what is wrong. Before a matter is brought before an assembly of messengers, it is right and good to confirm it with the party or parties concerned. Admonition or attempt to put right the matter in a church should be done privately first. Owen made this clear by the following example:

> "If it be reported, or known by credible testimony that any church hath admitted into the exercise of divine worship any thing superstitious or vain, or if the members of it walk like those described by the apostle, Phil. 3:18-19, unto the dishonour of the gospel and of the ways of Christ, the church itself not endeavouring its own reformation and repentance, other churches walking in communion therewith, by virtue of their common interest in the glory of Christ and honour of the gospel, after more private ways for its reduction, as opportunity and duty may suggest unto the elders, ought to assemble in a synod for advice, either as to the use of further means for the recovery of such a church, or to withhold communion from it in case of obstinacy in its evil ways."[21]

What if the erring church is adamant about continuing in a course of action that is detrimental to the peace of the churches, or in holding to beliefs that are contradictory to the fundamentals of the faith? What if that church is convinced that it is in the right? Other churches would still have no jurisdictional power over it. The autonomy of the church is still to be upheld. The churches in regular fellowship with the erring church would be obliged to register their unhappiness with it, limit their fellowship with it, or even cut off fellowship with it completely, until there is acknowledgment of the sins and repentance. Depending on the seriousness of the errors involved, a decree (or official statement) may be issued by the as-

[20] This was listed separately as the "formal cause" or justification for churches to associate together, JO, Vol. 16, p. 198.

[21] JO, Vol. 16, p. 198.

sociation to other churches so that they may decide on the proper course of actions to take with regard to the erring church.

The decline in many churches through the ages could have been checked or minimised if there had been proper associational life among the churches. It is interesting to note that the divisions and decline among the Particular Baptists in the nineteenth century was due in part to the fact that the validity and value of church associations began to be questioned.[22] The other factor contributing to their decline was the rise of hyper-Calvinism in their midst. John Owen's words could have been appropriately applied to them:

> "The want of a due attendance to this part of the communion of churches, with respect unto gospel worship in its purity, and gospel obedience in its power, was a great means of the decay and apostasy of them all. By reason of this negligence, instead of being helpful one to another for their mutual recovery, and the revival of the things that were ready to die, they gradually infected one another, according as they fell into decays, and countenanced one another by their examples unto a continuance in such disorders."[21]

12.3 Other Systems Of Connectionalism

During the phase of Independent ascendancy in the Commonwealth period, the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order was produced. Appended to this document was the Platform of Church Polity which states in Article 27:

> "Besides these occasional synods or councils, there are not instituted by Christ any stated synods in a fixed combination of churches, or their officers in lesser or greater assemblies, nor are there any synods appointed by Christ in a way of subordination to one another."

This statement must be understood in the light of the historical situation of the time. The Westminster Assembly had produced its

[22] R. W. Oliver, pp. 13, 291.
[21] JO, Vol. 16, p. 198.

confession of faith just a few years before, during the phase of Presbyterian ascendancy. Article 27 of the Savoy Platform was intended to repudiate the ecclesiastical system of Presbyterianism as espoused in the Westminster Confession. It shows forth three inter-related elements in the Presbyterian setup which the Independents could not agree with – namely, that synods are arranged in a fixed combination of churches, that the officers of the churches are arranged in lesser or greater assemblies, and that the synods are arranged in subordination to one another.

The Presbyterian setup is well-described by Louis Berkhof:

> "The Reformed Churches have a number of governing bodies. Their relation to each other is marked by a careful gradation. They are known as consistory, classis, and synod. The consistory consists of the minister and the elders of the local church; the classis, of one minister and one elder of each local church within a certain district; and the synod, of an equal number of ministers and elders from each classis."[23]

Other Presbyterian denominations may call these bodies by different names – e.g. session, presbytery, synod, and general assembly – but the same basic setup prevails.

12.3.1 Grounds for rejecting Presbyterianism

We reject the Presbyterian system on two grounds. First, the Presbyterian system goes beyond the teaching of Scripture. It, in effect, breaches the Regulative Principle by adding to Scripture teachings that are not taught there. Prominent Presbyterians freely admit to the absence of clear teaching or example for their practice in the Scripture. They can only fall back on their idea of what "by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture" (Westminster Confession of Faith, Ch. 1:6), just as they do in maintaining infant baptism.

Louis Berkhof clearly wrote:

> "Scripture does not contain an explicit command to the effect that the local churches of a district must form an

[23] L. Berkhof, *Summary*, p. 146.

> organic union. Neither does it furnish us with an example of such a union. In fact, it represents the local churches as individual entities without any external bond of union."[24]

John Murray wrote:

> "It should be recognised that there is much in the form of organisation and procedure adopted in presbyterian churches that cannot plead the authority of the New Testament. And the reason why certain forms of organisation and procedure have been adopted and practised, which cannot plead the prescription or warrant of Scripture itself, is simply the recognition that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and government of the church which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, in accord with the general principles of the word of God."[25]

The second half of John Murray's statement would have to be assented to by Reformed Baptists if he were referring to matters such as the time and duration of worship, the number of hymns and psalms to be sung, and the order of the service. The 1689 Confession adopted that statement with reference to things that are truly indifferent. Murray, however, was referring to the system of hierarchy of church courts found in Presbyterianism. With that we beg leave to disagree and reject. That system is not only not necessary to the being or well-being of the church, but it constitutes a definite addition of something not taught in Scripture. It also contradicts the clear testimony of Scripture to the principle of the autonomy of the local church, which we shall consider next.

The second ground on which we reject the Presbyterian system is that it contradicts a clear teaching of the Bible, namely the autonomy of the church. The principle of autonomy is freely admitted by prominent Presbyterians. Herman Hoeksema, for example, states this of the church:

[24] L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 590.
[25] J. Murray, Vol. 2, p. 349.

> "It is autonomous. This autonomy she must never deny or surrender: for if she does, the result will be that she soon will be under the yoke of an hierarchical power. That the local church is autonomous is evident from Scripture, especially from the Book of Acts."[26]

Louis Berkhof similarly declares his belief in the autonomy of the local church. Our quarrel with these men is that after stating in no uncertain terms their belief in the autonomy of the local church, they begin to deny it by modifying the meaning of autonomy. This, to us, is nothing but theological double-talk. Berkhof, for example, states:

> "Thus the Reformed system honours the autonomy of the local church, though it always regards this as subject to the limitations that may be put upon it as a result of its association with other churches in one denomination,... Such a wider organisation undoubtedly imposes certain limitations on the autonomy of the local churches,..."[27]

The "autonomy" of the Presbyterians is no autonomy at all! How can there be autonomy when limitations are put upon the authority of the local church? How can there be autonomy when the ecclesiastical assemblies exercise judicial power over the local churches? Berkhof contradicts himself when he describes the Presbyterian system in these words, "The Reformed Churches have a number of *governing* bodies." (See above.[23])

Some Presbyterians, sensing the weight of Scripture evidences supporting the principle of the autonomy of the church, are wont to minimise the importance of the hierarchy of church courts in their system. Thomas Witherow, for example, wrote:

> "...the subordination of church courts, which some injudicious friends of Presbyterianism speak of as being a main feature of the system, is a mere accidental arrangement, which experience has proved conducive to union and strength, but which is by no means essential

[26] H. Hoeksema, p. 622.

[27] L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 584. Hoeksema also hedges on this matter, pp. 625-627.

[23] L. Berkhof, *Summary*, p. 146.

> to the existence of the system. This is proved by the fact that a denomination, without either synod or assembly, and possessing no church court whatever except a district presbytery, is nevertheless, a complete Presbyterian body."[28]

Such an argument, however, is totally unconvincing. That arrangement arises from circumstances, and not from choice. The true test of whether a gradation of church courts is essential to the system is when the denomination concerned is given a choice. Without a doubt, the full-blown gradation of church courts will manifest itself! It is an essential characteristic of Presbyterianism. That is why Witherow, earlier on in his book, defines the system he adheres to as follows:

> "Presbytery is that form of church government which is dispensed by presbyters or elders, met in session, presbytery, synod, or general assembly; and is such as is presented in the several Presbyterian Churches of Ireland, Scotland, England, and America."[29]

12.3.2 Fallacious arguments of Presbyterians

What are the theological arguments that have been raised by Presbyterians to support their system of church government? We are here not concerned with the pragmatic reasons that have been used, such as that the Presbyterian system is "conducive to union and strength" (Witherow, see above). The benefits that accrue from a practice should not be made the grounds for the practice. The arguments that have been used by the Presbyterians to support their system of a gradation of church courts amount to two.

The first argument is from the unity of the church of Christ. Louis Berkhof argues thus:

> "The church is described as a spiritual organism, in which all the constituent parts are vitally related to one another. It is the spiritual body of Jesus Christ, of which He is the

[28] T. Witherow, p. 69.
[29] T. Witherow, p. 14.

> exalted Head. And it is but natural that this inner unity should express itself in some visible manner, and should even, as much as possible in this imperfect and sinful world, seek expression in some corresponding external organisation."[24]

The flaw in Berkhof's argument is clear. He makes an unwarranted assumption – namely, that the spiritual unity of the church should be expressed in an external organisation. Two other steps, which constitute unwarranted assumptions as well, have been left out in his logic. Putting these in italics, all the steps taken in sequence would be:

i The church is a spiritual unity;

ii *This spiritual unity must be expressed visibly*;

iii The only visible expression of unity is that of an organisation;

iv *This organisation consists of an hierarchy of courts with authority over the churches.*

The same basic flaw is found in the argument of John Murray.[30] He interspersed assumptions with statements of fact, to build up a case for the Presbyterian system of church government. The crux of his argument is the unity of the body of Christ. Along the way he confounded fellowship with government. He then draws to a close with an air of authority, building up one statement upon another. Again, assumptions are interspersed with facts. Unwarranted extrapolations are also made. For example, he argues thus:

> "The only permanent institution for government is the eldership, the 'presbuterion'. In some way or other, this institution is the means whereby corporate government is to be effected. We should keep in mind that the gifts Christ bestows are for the good, for the edification of the whole body. It is consonant with this ecumenical extension of the relevance of gifts that the gifts for rule, as well as those for other phases of ministry, should be brought

[24] L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 590.
[30] J. Murray, Vol. 2, pp. 340-344.

> to bear upon the edification of the whole church, as well as upon the local congregation."[31]

Let us analyse Murray's argument. He correctly states that the eldership is the only permanent institution for government. He wrongly assumes that there should be corporate government of some kind, which he earlier proposed from the unity of Christ's church. He then extrapolates local church government to the government of a group of churches in a rather tentative way – "in some way or other". Next, he correctly states that the gifts of Christ are for the edification of the whole body. Then, he wrongly asserts that the only way by which the gift of rule can edify the whole church is by that rule being exercised in the whole church.

The New Testament, however, intends that the *presbuterion* of each local church be responsible for the rule in that local church and no farther. As each local church is ruled well, the whole catholic church will be edified. Moreover, what did Murray mean by "the whole church"? He clearly intends us to understand that as "a Presbyterian denomination". If his argument is granted as correct, all churches in the world should be linked by the same rule, and not just the Presbyterian denomination that Murray had in mind! The fallacy of Murray's argument becomes obvious.

The second argument used by Presbyterians to justify their system of church government is based on Acts 15. This is the only passage of Scripture that they can appeal to. Yet, this passage of Scripture does not teach what they practise – as is freely acknowledged by many of their theologians. They attempt to build up a system upon the principle that there should be recourse for appeal, consultation or protestation between churches. In the process, they go far beyond the simplicity of biblical teaching so as to become unbiblical. Indeed, there are those who have been reared in Presbyterian systems who are honest enough to repudiate the claims made from Acts 15. Eric Alexander, for example, wrote as follows on Acts 15:

> i "The conference was not a conference of delegates from all the churches even in that area. It was the church at Antioch sending to the church at Jerusalem

[31] J. Murray, Vol. 2, p. 344.

for advice (Acts 15:2). When Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem, they were 'welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders' (Acts 15:4). Thus Acts 15 cannot be a model either for a presbytery or for a general assembly. It was simply an occasion of conferring between two churches, albeit the Jerusalem church was where most of the apostles seemed to be.

ii It was a conference of churches called on an *ad hoc* basis because of a specific crisis. So far as we know it was never repeated. It is quite impossible therefore to deduce from this any kind of 'standing court' of the church, handing down authoritative decisions about all manner of issues.

iii It was convened under apostolic authority and the conclusion reached bore that apostolic authority (Acts 15:23).

So the authority of this council was not the authority of a majority decision of its members. It was apostolic authority. The parallel today for us would be to bow to the authority of the New Testament Scriptures, and perhaps to confer with brethren from other churches about the proper application of biblical truth to our contemporary situation.

From this evidence, it would be natural to conclude that the essence of biblical Presbyterianism is the appointment and rule of elders in every church; that every church being thus ruled has a great measure of autonomy; that occasional consultations will be wise and even necessary between churches to settle difficult questions of faith and practice, always under the authority of Holy Scripture."[32]

What Alexander describes in the last paragraph is in fact Independency! Instead of calling himself an "Independent Presbyterian" he should call himself an Independent. The essence of historic Presbyterianism is the "general assemblyism" which he tries to repudiate. The word "presbuteros" is biblical, but it has been monopolised by

[32]E. Alexander, *Biblical Presbyterianism*.

Presbyterians and clothed with their meaning of it so much so that the continuing use of a term like "presbyterian" would create unnecessary confusion. More than three hundred years ago, John Owen was faced with a similar dilemma. His study of Scripture revealed a need to adjust some key concepts found in traditional Presbyterianism. Through reading John Cotton's book, "Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven", he came to realise that the view he had now come to was nothing but Independency! He wrote, "...when I compare what then I wrote with my present judgment, I am scarce able to find the least difference between the one and the other; only a misapplication of names..."[33]

Presbyterians make a great fuss about the impossibility of appeal in the Independent system when a church member is unjustly disciplined.[34] This charge is nothing but a complete misrepresentation of Independency. The unique way by which interchurch fellowship works itself out in Independency has been described above. Appeal for a hearing by an assembly of messengers is possible, without the assembly having judicial power over the churches represented. Churches are able to associate together without breaching the autonomy of each distinct church.

If we were to argue like the Presbyterians, we may point out that:

i For all their talk about the unity of the church, there exist not one Presbyterian denomination in the world, but many, and often in the same country and locality.

ii When one or two churches go astray, the tendency is for the whole Presbyterian denomination to be dragged astray as well. History has proved this time and again. The breakup of the Presbyterian Church in America to form the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, in which Gresham Machen was involved, is an example. The story of the many Presbyterian churches in Scotland is another.

12.3.3 Episcopal and Congregational connectionalism

We have discussed at great length the Presbyterian system as it contrasts with Independency. What of Episcopacy and Congregation-

[33] JO, Vol. 13, p. 223.
[34] T. Witherow, pp. 64-65.

alism? Episcopacy shares a similar feature with Presbyterianism in that an hierarchy of governing authority is found in both. The difference between them is that while Presbyterianism has an hierarchy of committees of individuals, Episcopacy has an hierarchy of individuals. In the Roman Church as well as the eastern Orthodox Churches, the pope and patriarchs have the greatest authority. This authority fans itself down in decreasing order in the persons of other ecclesiastical officials. In the Anglican Church, the archbishops are the top-most ecclesiastics. The reigning monarch is the head, or governor, of the church.

Congregationalism is practised today by many independent churches, including the General Baptists. These churches tend either to avoid connectionalism of all and any kind, or to engage in over-organised connectionalism of one kind or another. Those that avoid connectionalism are content to have loose interaction with other churches as and when the opportunity arises. Those that tend to be involved in over-organised connectionalism take pains to emphasise the point that the member churches are autonomous. There is, of course, the constant tension that is experienced between getting the member churches to conform and allowing them the liberty of deciding whether or not to conform. The situation often arises when a member church feels that its autonomy is being encroached upon.

The Congregational connectionalism of most General Baptists, including that of the Southern Baptist Convention in America as well as many Baptist conventions in other countries, is of the heavily-structured variety. The view propounded by the Congregationalist, Edward Hiscox, is a typical example.[35] This form of connectionalism may be traced to Mennonite influence in the seventeenth century.[36] Lumpkin states this of the Orthodox Creed of 1678:

> "It also presents clear evidence of the tendency among General Baptists in the late years of the seventeenth century to elevate the ministry and to centralise authority. It is the only confession of the century to elevate the association as an institution above local churches. Article 34 commits the 'executive part' of church discipline to ministers and Article 39 gives to the general assemblies

[35] E. T. Hiscox, pp. 311-343.
[36] A. C. Underwood, pp. 119–128.

> 'lawful power to hear and determine, as also to excommunicate.' There were General Baptists, however, who strongly resisted this view of the power of general councils. Article 31 shows that messengers (or bishops) were ordained by 'bishops of the same function', and that they ordained pastors and governed congregations."[37]

The organised structuralism of Congregationalism is such that the uninitiated would have to be forgiven for comparing it with that in Presbyterianism. The major differences between the connectionalism of the two systems are: (i) In Congregationalism, the autonomy of the local churches is insisted upon, at least in theory, while it is not so in Presbyterianism; (ii) There is greater "lay involvement", that is unordained individuals playing prominent roles, in the Congregational system, whereas ordained ministers play the leading roles in Presbyterianism.

12.3.4 Reformed Baptists today

Reformed Baptist churches today are struggling to establish their ecclesiological roots. Some are beginning to rediscover the rich heritage of associational life in the Particular Baptist churches of the past.[38] Some are treading cautiously in view of the history of over-organisation seen in the Baptist Union, formed in 1812 and later united with the General Baptists, as well as in the many modern Baptist Associations and Conventions. Others are reacting in a variety of ways to the isolationist tendency seen in some Reformed Baptist churches.

There are those who are attempting to organise associations and fellowships along the line of Presbyterianism. They advocate a connectionalism between churches that curtails to some extent the autonomy of the member churches. There is, here, a confusion of church fellowship with church government. There are others who desire to unite Reformed Baptists around the world under an umbrella organisation. Any such attempt would seem to go even beyond Presbyterianism, which, as we have seen, links only churches of the denomination together and no farther.

[37] W. L. Lumpkin, p. 296.
[38] RT 103 & 104, 1988.

In the attempt to encourage interchurch fellowship, the word "interdependency" has been used. This will only create confusion since the word conflicts with the idea of independency, or autonomy, in the *government* of the local church. While it is understood that those who use that term intend it to refer only to the *communion* of churches, it will lead the unwary to the idea that some limitations should be imposed on the self-governing right and authority of the church. Hiscox rightly pronounced the idea of the interdependence of churches a fiction.[39]

To be noted also is the fact that the regional connectionalism of the early Particular Baptists was more definite, tangible, and organised, than the loose idea of "association" that prevails among some Reformed Baptists today. Occasional correspondence with some churches overseas, plus attending some annual conferences, plus receiving occasional visitors from other churches do not add up to the associational life that was characteristic of the early Particular Baptists. Equally, a loose fraternal made up of ministers of various denominations does not constitute a regional association of the Particular Baptist type. This is not to deny that there is a place for wider fellowship between churches of various denominations. All we are pointing out here is the need for Reformed Baptists today to recover the definite regional fellowship of churches that was practised by the early Particular Baptists.[40]

12.4 Summary

1 The communion of churches arises from their union with Christ, and therefore with one another. Communion is not of the essence of government. The communion of churches may be seen as consisting of two aspects. Abstractly considered, it consists of the execution of gospel duties by the individual churches. Practically considered, it is the mutual interaction of churches to advance the cause of Christ and edify the whole catholic church. The latter is often called "interchurch fellowship".

[39] E. T. Hiscox, p. 148.

[40] A helpful "Association Covenant", produced and used by a group of Reformed Baptist churches in Southern California, is found in Appendix C of this book.

2 It is practically impossible to fellowship with every church in the world. Of necessity, interchurch fellowship has to be practised selectively. Opportunities for fellowship with other churches may be left to providence, or it may be deliberately sought. The latter is more biblical, and is expressed in the 1689 Confession of Faith, Chapter 26, paragraphs 14 and 15. The regional assembly of messengers from associating churches should convene regularly, while the assembly of messengers from all like-minded churches should convene as and when needed. Messengers should predominantly be elders but may include other men approved by the churches.

3 The assembly of messengers has no power of jurisdiction over the member churches. It has only the power to advise, and to persuade by means of the truths of Scripture. 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.

4 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 – first, 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.

5 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. 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 – first, Congregationalism insists on upholding the autonomy of the member churches, at least in theory; and second, there is more lay involvement than is found in Presbyterianism.

6 Reformed Baptists today are struggling to establish their ecclesiological identity. There is a need to recover the associational life of the early Particular Baptists.

Thirteen

CONCLUSION

We have discussed at length 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. The reader will have anticipated which form we believe to be the biblical one.

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 Regula-

tive 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, duly recognised and appointed by the congregation, are to 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 – 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 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 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 *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 interactions of the churches to advance the cause of Christ and edify the whole universal church. The Scripture shows that churches in a region should definitely associate together. Such an association has no power of jurisdiction over the member churches.

Following the method used by Thomas Witherow and G. I. Williamson, we shall use a table to compare the four forms of church government.[1,2]

Some explanations are in order. The principle of "the communion of churches" is strictly not of the essence of church government. We have nevertheless included it in our delineation of the form of church government since it has such direct and intimate bearing on the life of the local church.

[1] T. Witherow, pp. 58-76.

[2] G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, p. 233.

Principle	**Episc**	**Presby**	**Indep**	**Congre**
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 Churches	No	No	Yes	?

The question marks in the table indicate that the principles are either inconsistently upheld or differently practised in churches of the same system. Traditional Presbyterianism recognises "the headship of Christ" in theory, but denies it by advocating *Co-operatism* in the relationship between church and state. Three different views on the eldership prevail in Presbyterianism. Ordination, although practised, carries a different meaning and purpose compared to the biblical teaching.

In Congregationalism, *popular election* of the biblical kind is not practised. Instead, a democratical election is practised whereby the people choose their leaders by voting to get a consensus. Traditionally, Congregationalism practised the *ordination* of its ministers or elders. Today, there are those who regard it as optional.

To Episcopalians and Presbyterians, *the communion of churches* operates only between denominations. Within their own denominations, the churches are linked together organisationally and judicial power is exercised over them centrally. Congregational churches either avoid connectionalism of any kind, or engage in connectionalism that is heavily organised. To the uninitiated, the connectionalism of Congregationalism may appear similar to the Presbyterian kind. 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 in Congregationalism than in Presbyterianism.

A glance at the table above will show that all the principles of

church government are found in Independency. It is to be remembered that there are paedobaptist Independents who hold to the principle of "the gathered church" inconsistently by retaining infant baptism. We would conclude that Independency, as traditionally practised by the Particular Baptists, is the biblical form of church government.

None of the principles are found in Episcopacy. Episcopacy would have to be rejected as an unbiblical system which is wholly of human origin.

On the other end of the spectrum is Congregationalism. It has some principles that are biblical. It tends to fall short of the biblical teachings and under-emphasise the importance of form. It favours a fluidity and freedom that borders on anarchy. Pragmatism tends to dominate, so that the teachings of the Bible are often ignored – rule by elders, the priority of the ministry, the validity of the ruling elder, the unity of the eldership, and ordination. The claim is often made that these matters are not as important as, say, the winning of souls to Christ.

Presbyterians often claim that their form of church government is the golden mean that lies between Episcopacy and Congregationalism, and that it is the system closest to the apostolic model.[3,4] That claim can be sustained only by confounding Independency with Congregationalism. The moment a fourth system is countenanced, namely fully-fledged Independency, which is different from Congregationalism, the picture changes. Episcopacy has to be dropped out of the consideration because it possesses not an iota of biblical characteristic. Which system is now the golden mean?

Presbyterians have the tendency to hold to more than is taught in Scripture – the very opposite tendency of Congregationalists. A visible universal church is claimed on the basis of those scriptures that refer to believers (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:2, Rom. 15:9-12). A mixed church membership is justified by appeal to the parable of the wheat and tares in Matthew 13. The "right of appeal" and a "gradation of church courts" are read into Acts 15. Infant baptism and its accompanying embellishments – the "age of discretion", confirmation, sprinkling, sacralism, etc. – are upheld without any clear teaching

[3]W. Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, Vol. 2, p. 545.
[4]T. Witherow, pp. 75-76.

or example of Scripture.

At the root of the differences between the Particular Baptists and the Presbyterians is a difference in the understanding of *the sufficiency of Scripture*.[5] The 1689 Confession contains these words 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."

This paragraph was copied verbatim from the Westminster Confession of Faith, the words in italics excepted. The corresponding phrase in the Westminster Confession was, "or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture". Paedobaptists would claim that infant baptism is something that may be deduced from Scripture – from the covenant God made with Abraham – but Baptists would say it is "not necessarily contained" in Scripture, and thus to be rejected. Both confessions of faith say that "some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and the government of the church" are to be ordered by the light of nature. Apart from "some circumstances", all else concerning worship and church government must find their sanction in Scripture. The Regulative Principle thus applies not only to worship, but also to church government.[6] The Presbyterians, however, only conscientiously apply the Regulative

[5] L. R. Bush and T. Nettles, pp. 392-393.

Principle to worship, but not to church government.[7]

13.2 Churches Today

Many believers are bewildered by the many types of churches there are around today. It seems an impossible task to classify them, let alone to determine which is a true church and which is not. One approach towards making some sense out of the prevailing chaos is to note that God has revealed to us not only a *faith* to believe but also an *order* to follow – a system of doctrine, as well as a form of church government.[8]

It would be a futile exercise to attempt to measure each church by all the principles that we have enunciated above. This is because modern churches arose for reasons other than to adopt a more biblical form of church government. As such, each church would have elements of each of the four basic forms in it. In contrast, the churches that arose directly from the Reformation and its aftermath had an eye toward adopting a more biblical form of church government.

On continental Europe, the Lutheran Church adopted Episcopacy while the Reformed Church (that is, those following John Calvin) adopted Presbyterianism. In Britain, the Church of England adopted Episcopacy while the Church of Scotland adopted Presbyterianism. In the early seventeenth century, the majority of the Puritans stayed in the Church of England with the view of attempting to reform it from within. The Separatists moved out of the Church of England, believing that it was beyond reform. They adopted the Independent form of church government, of the paedobaptist version. The Particular Baptist churches were formed when some Separatists came to the baptistic view. Most of the Puritans were of the Presbyterian view, while some of them were Independents.

After the Great Ejection of 1662, the Puritans joined the cause of Nonconformity. Those who remained in the Church of England

[6]The Regulative Principle of worship states that nothing is to be introduced into the worship of God except those things that are expressly commanded in Scripture. Those who do not hold to this principle believe that whatever is not forbidden in Scripture is permissible to be introduced.

[7]See, for example, G. I. Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism*, Vol. 2, pp. 21-24 cf. pp. 101-105. Also compare with T. Witherow, pp. 72-73, 75.

[8]J. H. Thornwell, Vol. 4, p. 218.

after this date should be regarded as Anglicans, and not Puritans.[9] By the year 1662, the four basic forms of church government had become quite established – Episcopacy, Presbyterianism, Independency, and Congregationalism. Unhappily, Independency was confused and confounded with Congregationalism. The latter was seen as an extreme form of the former, when in reality, the two were distinct systems.

To facilitate in the assessment of the churches today, it would seem best to single out the main features of each of the four forms of church government. The churches may then be classified according to which of the four bare systems they correspond closest to. Here, then, are the main characteristics of the four forms of church government:

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

Presbyterianism is characterised by: (i) An hierarchy of committees of individuals forming a gradation of church courts; and, (ii) The local churches being ruled by elders.

Independency is characterised by: (i) The autonomy of the local church; and (ii) Rule being exercised by elders, but with congregational consent.

Congregationalism is characterised by: (i) The autonomy of the local church; (ii) Rule being exercised by the congregation, through a process of democratic voting to get a consensus.

Let us now attempt to classify some churches according to these four systems. 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.[10] The Methodist churches in Britain practise a form of Presbyterianism, in which there is no bishop. 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, and so is the *Sidang Injil Borneo* (SIB, or Borneo Evangelical Church). The General Baptist churches

[9] D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Puritans*, pp. 237-259.

and the *Sidang Injil Borneo* practise a definite connectionalism.

The Open Brethren churches would fall into the category of Independency. The Independency of the Brethren churches is of the elementary kind, one that is devoid of the principles of "the priority of the ministry", "ordination", "the gathered church", and the definite association of churches. The priesthood of all believers is emphasised to such an extent that there is a denial of the place of a full-time pastor. The belief in *the equality of all elders* leads them to practise preaching by rotation between themselves. Ordination is dispensed with. Most Brethren churches do not have a membership roll, and covenant commitment is of the implicit kind, if existent at all.

The Reformed Baptist churches are Independent. Some Reformed Baptist churches hold to the Absolute 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.

There are churches around today that would continue to call themselves "Congregational" by virtue of the fact that their confession of faith is the Savoy Declaration of 1658, which was published under the title of "A Declaration of the Faith and Order Owned and Practised in the Congregational Churches in England". In view of the definite shift in the meaning of the word "Congregational" down the centuries, and its present connotation in many parts of the world, these churches would need to qualify their use of the name. Since the alternative name of "Independency" is available, which historically had been used interchangeably with "Congregationalism", it would be better to adopt it instead.

13.3 Form And Substance

13.3.1 The necessity of form

The question would inevitably be raised, "Is the form of church government really important?" We would answer in the affirmative. Anything that is clearly revealed in Holy Writ must be regarded as important. It might be relatively less important than other matters,

[10]R. Hunt, pp. 143-146.

but that is quite different from saying that it is of no importance. Compared to the faith of the church, the order of the church might be relatively less important. The order is important, however, because it is also revealed in Scripture.

The *form* is divinely ordained to serve the *faith*. The church is the pillar and ground of truth. The church is not a lifeless, physical building. Neither is it a loose and incoherent gathering of believers. It has a form, arising from its members conducting themselves in a certain way. "I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God... (1 Tim. 3:15)." An egg minus its substance is a mere eggshell. The substance without the eggshell will be a mass of protoplasm that is both difficult to handle and easily infected by foreign matter. God has designed that the Christian faith should be contained, expressed, and preserved in a certain form of church government.

The essence of a church is not in its form, but a church without a *biblical* form is destined for trouble. Early Methodism was born in the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century as an extremely lively church that was virtually without form. Its leaders, notably John Wesley, recognised the importance of a form of church government to contain and sustain the life of the new church. Unfortunately, he adopted a modified form of Presbyterianism which was not much better than the Episcopacy of the Church of England from which he had seceded. His followers in America adopted outright Episcopacy.[11] Those man-made systems soon stifled the life of the church so that today, Methodism is no more the force it used to be.

The Reformers and the Puritans were concerned not only with the recovery of correct doctrine, but also with the recovery of biblical worship and the biblical form of church government. Luther's ninety-five theses were hammer-blows directed against the whole corrupt system of Rome, not just against its doctrine of "salvation by works". The Puritans campaigned for the removal of vestments, the sign of the cross in prayer, the use of liturgies and other unbiblical practices, from the Church of England. The many communions within Nonconformity – Presbyterians, Independents, Particular Baptists, Congregationalists – arose because of a desire on the part of those concerned to establish churches that conformed more

[11] NIDCC, pp. 653-656.

to the biblical pattern. Those who claim to be the spiritual descendants of the Reformers and the Puritans can do no less. The work of reformation includes the recovery of the biblical form of church government.

13.3.2 Interchurch fellowship

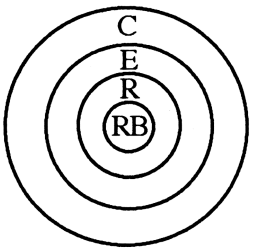
It is necessary for believers, and the church, to separate from error. It is also necessary to unite over the truth. Many Christians are exercised over how best to maintain both these in balance and proportion. One can be too broad so that those of questionable beliefs and practices are embraced into fellowship. One can also be too narrow so that even good men are excluded from fellowship. Three considerations will help us to determine how best to forge interchurch fellowship – first, truth is of paramount importance; second, the number and order of Christ's offices must not be ignored; and third, the principle of selective fellowship applies in interchurch fellowship as much as it does in personal fellowship.

Unity should be pursued *in the truth* (Eph. 4:4-6). Ecclesiastical, organisational union does not bespeak the spiritual unity taught in the Bible. The modern ecumenical movement pursues an external unity between churches without giving attention to the maintenance of the truth. In Reformed Baptist circles, there are churches that are weak on distinctives to the point that they may hardly be regarded as "Reformed Baptist". From a position of general weakness, we are attempting to forge a unity that minimises the importance of distinctives. The unity we hope to achieve will necessarily be loose and weak. Should we not rather adopt the approach of the early Particular Baptists? Emphasise unity around the truth. Carry this to its logical conclusion. Require that Reformed Baptist unity be forged around Reformed Baptist distinctives. Require that Reformed unity be forged around Reformed distinctives. Require that evangelical unity be forged around evangelical distinctives. The approach, as far as unity between churches is concerned, should be from the inner circle outwards.

The *number and order of Christ's offices* should be taken into account. The prophetic office is followed by the priestly office, and then by the kingly office – in that order and of that number. Doctrine must come first, followed by worship, and then church gov-

ernment. A church is extremely defective when it only recovers the Independent form of church government, but remains Arminian in theology. A church is hardly reformed if it is content with adopting the doctrines of grace and proceeds no further to recover biblical worship and church government. These implications, arising from the three offices of Christ, run parallel with the principle of selective fellowship. (See Chapter 12, The Communion of Churches.)

Selective fellowship is consistent with common sense, as well as with the way gospel work was carried out in apostolic time – we are to do good to all, but especially to those who are of the household of faith (Gal. 6:10); we are to go into all the world to preach to every creature, but our witness has to begin "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8)"; fellowship was established between churches in a region, before extending to other churches farther afield (e.g. 2 Cor. 8); the Lord Himself practised selective fellowship in His dealings with the disciples.



SYMBOLS

RB : Reformed Baptist Churches
R : Reformed Churches
E : Evangelical Churches
C : Christian Churches

From these three considerations, we arrive at the model for inter-church fellowship represented by the diagram above. The innermost circle represents fellowship between Reformed Baptist churches. Like-minded churches should form the closest possible fellowship with one another. This is particularly so for churches in a given region. Reformed Baptist churches share the same doctrine, the same manner of worship, and the same form of church government. This does not mean, of course, that they are stereotyped in all these areas. Fellowship then extends outward from the innermost circle, in decreasing order of closeness to other churches. Reformed Baptist churches should find closer affinity with reformed paedobaptists than with

other evangelicals. All reformed churches share the same basic emphases on doctrine – the authority of Scripture, the primacy of the word of God, the doctrines of grace. They also share the same basic emphases on worship – adherence to the Regulative Principle of worship, the primacy of preaching, simple and joyful worship, hearty singing of spiritual songs that are rich in theological content, extempore prayer that is spiritual in nature. Again, there is not a boring uniformity among them. Some churches, for example, would sing exclusively the Psalms while others believe in singing hymns as well. Historically, the Particular Baptists had closer affinity with the reformed paedobaptists than with the Arminian General Baptists.[12]

The next level of fellowship is with other evangelicals whose faith and practice are, in the main, governed by the authority of Scripture. The final, and weakest, level of fellowship is with other Christian churches, including the general "evangelicals". Indeed, fellowship is not possible with some beginning from this level. This would include churches that teach baptismal regeneration, charismatic churches, liberals, and the more obvious neo-evangelicals. We do not deny that there are truly regenerate people in such churches. We are here dealing with *interchurch* fellowship.

Just as unity is pursued *in the truth* (Eph. 4:4-6), it should be pursued in the *spirit* of the truth (Eph. 4:1-3). A church can be hard and harsh while proclaiming and upholding the truth. There may be a zeal that is without love, an orthodoxy that is devoid of humanity.

13.3.3 Spiritual life

This leads us to consider the necessity of spiritual life in the church. A church can be right in its substance and form, and yet show no sign of true spiritual vitality. It can have a good confession of faith and be orthodox in every way, and yet be spiritually dead. Just as the *shekinah* glory of God departed from the temple in the Old Testament time, it can depart from a church that has left its first love, or is lukewarm (Ezek. 10:18; Rev. 2:4; 3:16). When that happens, the lampstand would have been effectively removed. It is important to abide in Christ, to feed on Him, and to drink of Him (Jn. 15:1-8; 6:35; 7:37-39). Nothing can replace a contrite heart, a

[12]Many historians have not made clear the great gulf that existed between the Particular Baptists and the General Baptists. See, for example, A. C. Underwood.

humble dependence on God, and a clear resolve to be faithful and loyal to Him. Christ must be present by His Spirit in the church for it to be an instrument mighty in God, for pulling down strongholds.

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. It is designed for that purpose. In the quest for revival, we must not neglect reformation in the life of the church. God gives revival as and when He pleases. Will churches be caught unprepared when revival comes? All that is gained in revival will be lost in no time, if there are not the vessels to contain, sustain, and propagate this gain. Souls newly won to Christ will need nurture. Preachers will need to be trained up and thrust forth to proclaim the truth. And should the momentum of revival slowdown, these churches will be the means to maintain the cause of Christ until the next wave of revival comes!

13.4 Reformed Baptists Today

The propriety of using the name "Reformed Baptist" has been called into question by some Calvinistic Baptists.[13] It is claimed that Baptists were never "reformed" in that they did not emerge from the apostate church of Rome. It is claimed that Baptists stand in the tradition of those who through the centuries have been characterised by the doctrines and practices of the apostles. Baptists are aligned with the Anabaptists the Waldensians, the Albigenses, the Donatists, and all other groups who were never part of mainline, sacral churches. This view is increasingly being popularised by Baptists as well as Mennonite writers.

The present writer is of the opinion that this view is not wholly correct when applied to the Particular Baptists. The historical beginning of the Particular Baptists was rooted in the Separatist-Puritan background of seventeenth century England. They were, in fact, part of the larger Puritan movement of that period. They shared the same doctrines and emphases as the Reformers, infant baptism and sacralism excepted. Their ecclesiology was a development of the Independency of Separatism.

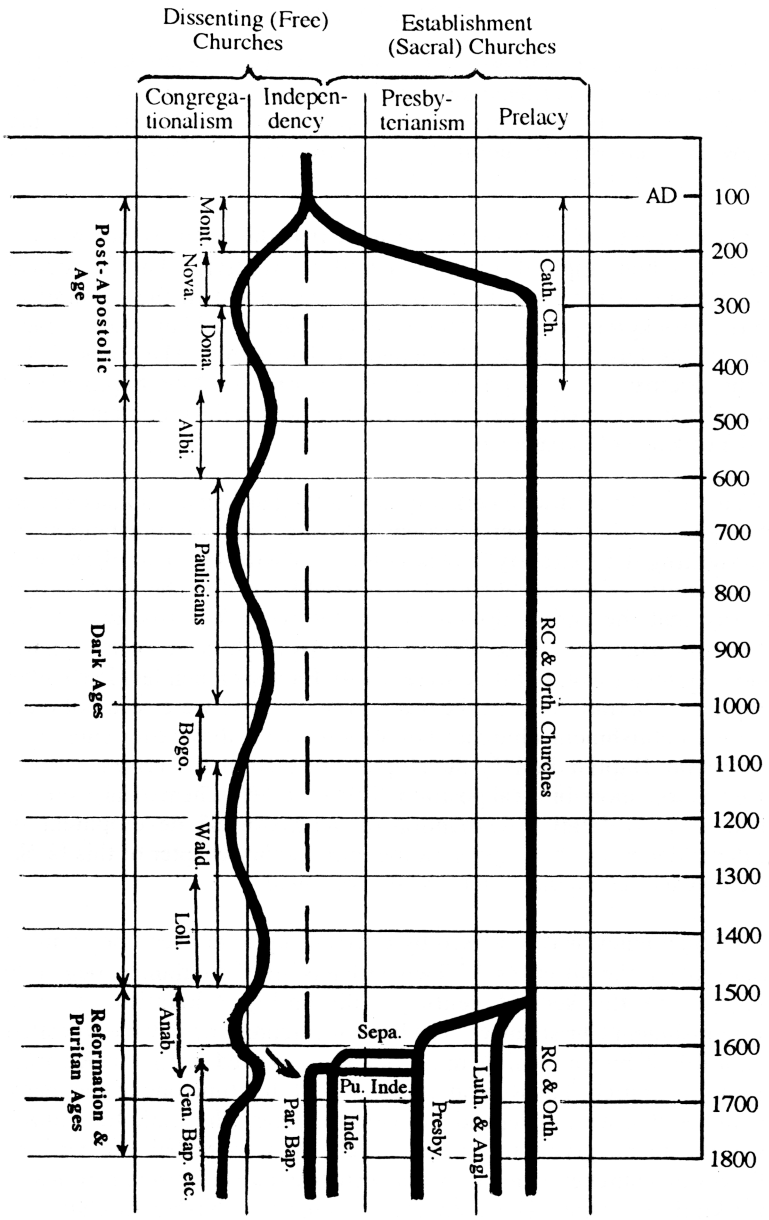
[13] K. H. Good, *Are Baptists Reformed?*

What may be said with certainty is that the Particular Baptists shared the same spirit, and were thrown into the same circumstances, as "dissenting Christianity". This contrasted with the "establishment Christianity" of the sacral churches. It would, therefore, be more correct to say that the earlier dissenting groups were *fore-runners* of the Particular Baptists. These dissenting groups might have been baptistic and congregational, but they were hardly Baptists much less Particular Baptists. Aberrations from the truth, even heresies, were seen not only in the establishment churches but also in the the dissenting churches. Particular Baptist beliefs developed away from the errors of both streams to a more biblical position. This is shown schematically on the next page. A detailed description of the historical development of Independency has been given in the introductory chapter of this book. We give a brief explanation of the diagram here.

Independency was practised by churches up to at least one hundred years after the apostles.[14] Two streams of Christianity began to develop in the second century – "dissenting Christianity" and "establishment Christianity". The latter was represented by the so-called Catholic Church, which must not be confused with the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman church was at that time one of the many churches that were independent of one another. The Catholic Church was the name given to those churches that opposed the various dissenting churches, many of which were teaching errors and heresies of one kind or another. The Catholic Church, or establishment churches, were sacral in nature – holding to the *territorial church concept* and infant baptism.

The dissenting churches, on the other hand, held to the *gathered church principle*, and practised believer's baptism. Their ecclesiology veered away in the direction opposite to that taken by the establishment churches. Being constantly harassed by the establishment churches for their other errors, they did not develop a clear ecclesiology so that it vacillated between Congregationalism and Independency. The more prominent groups from the second to the sixteenth centuries included the Montanists, the Novatians (Cathari), the Donatists, the Albigenses, the Paulicians, the Bogomiles, the Waldensians, the Lollards, and the Anabaptists.[15] Many of these groups

[14]W. Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, Vol. 2, pp. 549-550, 244-266.


Dissenting (Free) Churches
Establishment (Sacral) Churches
Congrega-tionalism
Independ-ency
Presby-terianism
Prelacy
AD
100
200
300
400
500
600
700
800
900
1000
1100
1200
1300
1400
1500
1600
1700
1800
Post-Apostolic Age
Dark Ages
Reformation & Puritan Ages
Mont.
Nova.
Dona.
Albi.
Paulicians
Bogo.
Wald.
Loll.
Anab.
Gen. Bap. etc.
Par. Bap.
Inde.
Pu. Inde.
Sepa.
Presby.
Luth. & Angl.
Cath. Ch.
RC & Orth. Churches
RC & Orth.

propagated wrong doctrines connected with the Trinity, Christology, or seteriology. It is likely, however, that their errors had been exaggerated on many occasions by those in the establishment churches.[16]

From the time of Constantine, round about the year A.D. 450, Leo (390-461), the bishop of Rome, began to assert the supremacy of his church over all others.[17] Thus began the Dark Ages, which lasted more than a thousand years, when truth was buried under the superstitious teachings and human traditions of Rome. By this time, Prelacy was already firmly established. The other Catholic churches opposed the claim of Roman preeminency, and came to be known as Orthodox churches – the Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Syrian Orthodox Church, and the Orthodox Coptic Church of Egypt. These churches have continued on to this day.

The Reformation began in 1517, when Luther nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the Wittenberg church. As the Reformation progressed, the Lutheran Church was formed. The Church of England broke away from the Roman church when Henry VIII opposed the pope for not agreeing to his divorce. Both the Lutheran and Anglican churches continued to be prelatic in their church government. The Reformed churches that arose in continental Europe through the efforts of Calvin and Zwingli were Presbyterian. John Knox brought Presbyterianism back to Scotland. In England the majority of the Puritans, who remained in the Church of England to reform it from within, were also Presbyterian. They remained until ejected in 1662. The early Separatists, including men like Robert Browne, Francis Johnson and John Robinson, were Independent. The cause of Independency was helped by men such as John Cotton in America, John Owen in England, and the "Dissenting Brethren" of the Westminster Assembly.

The first Particular Baptist church emerged from the Independent Jacob-Lathrop-Jessey Church. The 1644 Confession of Faith, issued by the seven Particular Baptist churches in London, was based on the 1596 Confession of the English Separatists settled in Amster-

[15]NIDCC.
[16]K. H. Good, pp. 333ff.
[17]P. Jeffery, p. 72.

dam. The 1677/1689 Confession of Faith was based on the Westminster Confession of the Presbyterians, and the Savoy Declaration of Faith of the paedobaptist Independents. The Particular Baptists were Calvinistic in their soteriology, as were the Puritans of the other communions. The only contribution from the direction of the Anabaptists was the *gathered church principle*, which encompassed the immersion of believers.[18] This is shown by the curved arrow in the diagram.

In contrast to the Particular Baptists, the General Baptists were Arminian in soteriology. Although Thomas Helwys, who founded the first General Baptist church in England in 1612, had a Separatist background, his affiliation was wholly with the Anabaptists. His successor, John Murton, continued to correspond with the Mennonites in the Netherlands, It is not surprising, therefore, that they shared the same ecclesiology – a system that vacillated between Independency and Congregationalism. The General Baptists soon settled to the Congregational position. This happened towards the end of the seventeenth century. The early Particular Baptists had closer fellowship with the paedobaptist Puritans than with the General Baptists. In fact, it was the desire to distinguish themselves from the General Baptists and the Anabaptists that led to their publication of the 1644 Confession of Faith.[19]

From this sketch, it can be seen that the Particular Baptists developed away from both the lines of "dissenting Christianity" and "establishment Christianity" to a more biblical position, as far as their ecclesiology was concerned. Being Baptists, they belonged to "dissenting Christianity" in essence and spirit. Being Reformed, they held to a Calvinistic soteriology. The Particular Baptists were "reformed" because:

i they arose from the events fomented directly by the Reformation;

ii they held to the main truths and emphases recovered during the Reformation; and

iii they shared the same basic Reformation spirit of desiring to be biblical and God-honouring in doctrine and practice.

[18] B. R. White, *The Doctrine of the Church*, p. 573.
[19] W. L. Lumpkin, p. 145.

They belonged to the larger Puritan body which was made up of Separatists, Presbyterians, Independents, and Baptists whose life was characterised by a robust grasp of the teaching of Scripture, a depth of devotion, and a decided godliness. In so far as they dissociated themselves from the apostate church of Rome, they were Protestant. The Reformed Baptists of today share the same beliefs and practices of the early Particular Baptists who were Independent, Reformed, Puritan, and Protestant.

To use the name "Particular Baptist" would not be so appropnate today. Without the historical background of the seventeenth century, it will carry a negative connotation. The early Particular Baptists held to the doctnne of "particular redemption", as did all the other Calvinistic groups. The General Baptists, however, held to "general redemption", meaning that Christ's death on the cross was for the atonement of the sins of everyone in the world, instead of just for the elect of God. To use the name "Sovereign Grace Baptists" would also lead to misunderstanding since "Sovereign Grace" had in the past been associated with hyper-Calvinism.[20] Difficulties are encountered with other names that have been proposed. There are many churches that have opted for the name "Grace Baptist". Others, however, prefer the name "Reformed Baptists" for the reasons that have been given above.

This is not to say that the name of "Reformed Baptist" is without its problems. Many churches lineally connected with those founded at the time of the Reformation are only "reformed" in name. A dead orthordoxy has settled upon them, and there is no desire for reformation according to the word of God. There are also fundamentalist churches that call themselves "reformed" simply because they oppose the Roman Catholic Church in a most militant manner. The United Reformed Church in England is an amalgamation of different churches and is hardly "reformed" in our sense. It is in fact liberal in theology. With such "reformed" churches we have nothing to do. However, for the reasons stated above, it would seem best to retain the name of "Reformed Baptist" until such time as it is clearly inappropriate.

[20]I. H. Murray, *The Fight of Faith*, p. 234. [Adding to the confusion is the fact that a charismatic grouping of churches have called themselves "Sovereign Grace Churches". See footnote 7 in Chapter 1, "Introduction".]

There is yet another reason why the name "Reformed Baptist" is still suitable. It is important to maintain unity not only with those who hold to the truth in our day, but also with those who had upheld the truth in the past. Ecclesiastical pedigree or historical lineage without the truth makes mockery of true Christianity. Equally, adherence to truth without due recognition of others who had held to the same truth in times past would be sheer arrogance. Unity in the truth transcends space and time. Reformed Baptists rightly claim themselves to be the spiritual heirs of the Reformers, the Puritans, and the Particular Baptists. *That* is true communion of the saints! *That* is true catholicity!

We are coming to the end of the twentieth century, and moving into the twenty-first century. If the Lord does not return sooner to judge the world, will there be myriads of biblical churches established across the globe? Will mighty revivals come upon the world in the twenty-first century? For this we must work and pray. "Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen (Eph. 3:20-21)."

13.5 A Word To The Reader

The time for the present writer to withdraw has come. I have sought to present the biblical form of church government as best as I can. I need not hide the fact that this has been accomplished only through much toil and tears. As mentioned at the beginning of this book, some degree of polemic is unavoidable in a book of this nature. Our aim throughout has been to determine what is biblical, and not to "score points", or win an argument. I have attempted to present the views of others as fairly as I could. If anyone, or any view, has been misquoted or misrepresented, it is purely unintentional.

On the part of the esteemed reader, one of the following responses to what has been presented in this book is possible:

1 You disagree with Independency, as presented in this book. If that is the case, the onus is upon you to show where I have been wrong and what is the alternative view that is biblical. I would be glad to hear from you.

2 You are not sure whether Independency, as presented in this book, is correct. In that case, the onus is upon you to study further and come to a clear conviction which is the biblical form of church government. Why not read through this book again?

3 You are convinced that Independency, as presented in this book, is correct. The onus is upon you to act upon what you know to be true. May the Lord give you great wisdom as you respond to the truth!

In 1620, John Robinson addressed the members of his church who were migrating to New England, reminding them of the need to search further into the word of God for His truth, and to act upon it. We do well to heed his stirring words today:

> "I charge you before God and His blessed angels, that you follow me no further than you have seen me follow the Lord Jesus Christ. If God reveals anything to you by any instrument of His, be as ready to receive it as you were to receive any truth by my ministry, for I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy word. For my part, I cannot sufficiently bewail the condition of those reformed churches which are come to a period [i.e. a fullstop] in religion, and will go, at present, no further than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw; whatever part of His will our God has revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it; and the Calvinists, you see, stick fast where they were left by that great man of God, who yet saw not all things. This is a misery much to be lamented, for though they were burning and shining lights in their times, yet they penetrated not into the whole counsel of God; but were they now living, would be as willing to embrace further light as that which they first received, for it is not possible the Christian world should come so lately out of such thick anti-christian darkness and that perfection of knowledge should break forth at once."[21]

[21] E. H. Broadbent, pp. 245-246.

Appendix A: CHURCH DISCIPLINE

[Stuart Olyott, *Church Discipline*. This article first appeared in BT 163, April 1977.]

Properly speaking, an article on "Church Discipline" should concern itself with discussing the whole government and rule of the church. But the concern of this article is with one aspect only of this rather complex subject. We are not here dealing with formative or preventive discipline, but with *corrective discipline* – that is, with attempts to restore straying sinners at the local church level. We are considering those acts by which the local church, in the name of Christ, authoritatively admonishes, suspends or even excommunicates one of its members, with a view to his spiritual restoration. To approach this subject aright there are three things we must bear in mind. The first of these is the scriptural doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints. We do not believe any elect, called, justified sinner, can ever be lost. At the same time we do not believe that there are any grounds for maintaining that a person can be a child of God unless he continues and perseveres in the faith until the end.

The second is that the *means* which God has provided to keep us persevering is the life and ministry of the local church. The New Testament pattern is that converts are to be baptised and joined to a church. There they partake of the various means of grace, such as biblical teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and times of prayer. Each one of these is necessary for spiritual perseverance. So also is church discipline, exercised for the erring. Like the other means of grace it is to be exercised in, and as part and parcel of, local church

life. It is not to be viewed as a last resort, but is to be as much an integral part of church life as the other means of grace. It is one aspect of the church's expression of its brotherly love.

Thirdly, we must ever bear in mind the headship of the Lord Jesus Christ over His church. By what authority do church officers and the church itself exercise any of the means of grace which we have mentioned? By His authority! Each of them is to be received as from *Him*. The mouths which speak, and the hands which administer, are those of sinful men; nonetheless both word and deed are to be received as from Him. The same holds good in regard to church discipline. It is not something we are free to omit, for it has been divinely instituted. Just like any other means of grace, when it is exercised scripturally, it is to be received as from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the church. It is a discipline exercised in His name.

When these considerations are kept in mind, they will ensure not only that this important work gets done, but that it gets done with the right motives. It will be done out of love to the erring member, and with the knowledge that the eternal salvation of a straying member is linked to his spiritual restoration. Church discipline will be exercised as a means of grace, not of destruction; as an evidence of love, not of hate or fear. There will be the recognition that it is for "cure of sinners" [Richard Baxter, *Reformed Pastor*]. It will be done in the knowledge that "church censures are necessary for the reclaiming and gaining of offending brethren" [Westminster Confession]. With such love for the offender as the driving force, the work will be free from malice, revenge, spite or a spirit of superiority. "The wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God (James 1:20)."

The Methods

Having laid down the lines of approach to the subject, we must next consider what corrective discipline actually involves. The Scriptures reveal three ways of reclaiming wandering sheep, and we shall briefly examine each of them in turn.

Admonition

The chief means of keeping heavenly pilgrims in the way, but the

most neglected, is admonition. This is to be used by every church member when the issue is a private dispute; and by the spiritually mature in general, and the oversight in particular, when the issue is spiritual deterioration.

Private disputes

The passage of Scripture relevant at this point is Matthew 18:15-17, which deals with private disputes, although it teaches principles which have a wider bearing, as we shall see later.

The teaching of this passage is that if a brother offends against you, you are not to disclose his offence to anyone at all, for that would be a sin against the law of love. Rather, you are to go to see him privately. This is an obligation resting upon you. You are as much bound to do this, as he is to receive your admonition. The purpose of your visit is to endeavour to convince him of his fault, and to restore mutual good relations.

We must thank God that things usually end there! But we should solemnly note that the clear implication of the passage is that if your offending brother will not hear you, it is not at all likely that he will hear others. How we need to be able to accept the private admonitions of brethren!

If your brother will not hear you, you are to return with one or two others, in order that all that is said may be witnessed according to the requirements of Scripture (Dt. 19:15). It is still *you* who is trying to win your brother. It is not a case of multiple pressure. Naturally those you have taken will do their part in seeking to gain your brother. But the main purpose of their presence is so that they can bear witness should the issue come to court – namely, the church.

If your brother will not hear you, and those whom you have brought with you, then, and *only* then, is the matter to be brought before the church. If he is proved to be in the wrong, and continues to be obstinate and impenitent, Christ directs the church to exclude him – to treat him as if he had never been part of it.

How you will be reprimanded by onlookers if you do that! "What!" will be the exclamation, "you expelled him for *that*?" But it is not so. You would gladly have restored him from his fault. But he has treated the body of Christ with contempt, and this is indicative of something deeper. It is, as Calvin put it, to hold God and His tri-

bunal in derision. It is indicative of a hardening of the heart, and a root of bitterness springing up, which is a sign of "falling short of the grace of God (Heb. 12:15)." The offending brother does not, *in practice*, acknowledge that he has to submit to the judgment of the church of Christ, or that he is part of it. So the church is to treat him accordingly.

It is to be noted that the constant aim has been to restore the person concerned. But he refuses to be restored. He is guilty of contumacy (that is, stubborn disobedience), and thus is no longer to be considered a part of the body.

Spiritual deterioration

But we move on to consider the case of a member of the body who has fallen into a fault, such as stealing or immorality, of which another member has knowledge. It is not a private dispute, so the passage in Matthew 18 is not applicable. What, then, is the "other" member to do? Is he to tackle the sinning member himself?

We answer: no, not as a general rule, unless he is recognised as a man of obvious spiritual stature in the church (Gal. 6:1). This is a task for the divinely-appointed oversight. They are bishops, or overseers, who have been appointed to rule. They are pastors, or under-shepherds, appointed to feed and to guard the sheep. They have been commissioned to watch over the souls of others, for which they must give account. They labour amongst the flock, and are over it in the Lord; and to admonish and warn is a *principal* part of their work (1 Thess. 5:12-13).

The task of elders is to take note of signs of spiritual deterioration, and, as good pastors, to speak plainly to those in whom they see them. They are to examine the charges made by others, to summon witnesses if the offence is not admitted, and to take appropriate action. The New Testament makes it clear that it is their principal task to keep pilgrims in the way. This involves plain speaking to those whose lives are not what they should be.

The New Testament does not call for the inauguration of "witch-hunts", but it does insist that under-shepherds watch over their flocks. Admonition is the chief means of correction used by a good father, and elders are to be such fathers, who exercise the same authority, with the same spirit, in the church. They are explicitly forbidden to

engage in the lording and bullying which passes for admonition in the world, and are exhorted to be examples to their flocks. Their oversight is to be willing and unconstrained; not for personal profit or as mere 'duty', but of a ready mind; and the clothing of humility is to be theirs as they exercise this

How can an oversight fulfil its calling if there is no face-to-face correction in words? Sometimes a winsome word is needed, sometimes a stern rebuke. Some people need to be wooed, others warned. The Great Shepherd of the sheep did both, and under-shepherds must follow His example. False teachers most certainly need stern treatment, as Titus 1:13 and 3:10-11 make clear. But one who is weak in the faith will need different treatment, *although it is still authoritative correction*. To make this sort of distinction is basic to the pastoral office.

Suspension

Besides admonition, the word of God reveals another measure designed to reclaim erring brethren, namely, suspension.

The passage we need to consider is 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15. Here Paul is talking about people whom the church still had definite grounds to consider as truly regenerate, and thus brothers in the Lord (vv. 6, 15). But these people were guilty, not of one single lapse or fall, nor of spiritual deterioration which had gone on mostly unmarked, but of some manifest, overt, known irregularity. Their lives *obviously* did not match the gospel. They had received clear apostolic instructions, but had refused to obey them (vv. 7-8, 10-12, 14).

Paul instructed the church to withdraw from such persons (v. 6); not to have company with them, that they might be ashamed (v. 14); but not to count any of them as an enemy, but rather as a brother to be admonished (v. 15). The offender was to be treated as a Christian who needed to be restored. Social interaction with him was to be suspended, that he might be ashamed. But when church members did have contact with him, they were to admonish him for his sins: precisely what they already had been commanded to do in 1 Thessalonians 5:14.

What does this mean in practice today? We cannot stop disobedient Christians coming to church, for most of our places of worship

are registered as such, and so the doors must be open for all who wish to enter. We cannot turn them away unless they have committed a breach of the peace, or something similar. The New Testament church may have been able physically to withdraw from suspended members, but we cannot do so. How then can we put the principles of 2 Thessalonians 3 into practice today?

The very least we can do is this – we can remove such persons from all positions of responsibility in the local church, whatever they might be. We can suspend them from active participation in church ordinances, such as the Lord's Table, church meetings, discussion and so forth. And we can end all normal social interaction with them.

But our purpose in all such behaviour is that when the person involved sees the body smarting and being pained, he may realise that *he* is responsible, that *he* is the cause, and may be ashamed of the way he is living (v. 14). Hence the purpose is restorative. Genuine spiritual concern moves the church, under the direction of its oversight, to act in such a way, in order that the offending brother may be repentant and restored to full fellowship as soon as possible.

But what about the person who, having been thus suspended, and regularly admonished by the members he meets, shows no change of heart? Week after week goes by, and the church hopes and prays for his repentance and restoration; but he remains unchanged. He stubbornly refuses to hear the church. Once more it is a case of contumacy. So here too the principles of Matthew 18:17 come into operation. Such an unrepentant man is to be excommunicated.

Excommunication

We have seen that if either admonition or suspension, or both these measures of discipline, continue unheeded, the church of Christ is directed to exclude the offending person. We must again stress that this measure, like the others, is still designed to reclaim wandering sheep. Its intention is restorative. It is totally unlike the death penalty sanctioned by some in the past. The church uses "keys", not a sword. It is a spiritual measure, and is designed to secure spiritual ends. It is best referred to as *expulsion*, but is usually known as *excommunication*. There are several references to it in the New

Testament, but the most comprehensive is found in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 5, to which we now turn.

v. 1 In the church of Corinth a known sin was being perpetrated. It was proved beyond dispute. It had been going on for some time. It was a sin which was repulsive even in the world's eyes. It appears that a church member was guilty of an immoral relationship with his father's young second wife. Shame, great shame, must have been brought on the gospel!

v. 2 The church at Corinth was somewhat proud of itself and its achievements. It should, rather, have been grieving over this heinous offence. But it had not even crossed their minds that it was their duty to remove this offending person from the church.

v. 3 Although Paul is at a distance, he cannot view the situation with complacent indifference. He tells them what he, in his own spirit, has done with the offender. He tells them this to make it clear to the church what needs to be done; what *must* be done.

v. 4 "It is *you* who must do it," he says, "you, the local church at Corinth, gathered in the name of the head of the church, and with His power... I shall be with you in spirit..."

v. 5 "...you, the local church, must deliver this unrepentant man to Satan, for the destruction of the the flesh, that the spirit may be saved at last..." (Note how solemn and grave excommunication is; and yet its purpose is *still* restorative, remedial, healing, saving.)

v. 6 "It is useless to engage in boasting, and to be so proud of yourself as a church. Cannot you see what will happen if no action is taken? A little leaven will leaven the whole lump."

v. 7 "The Jews purged out leaven from their houses before they sacrificed the Passover. But Christ our Passover has already been sacrificed for us, and yet the old leaven of sin in the community of God remains. Purge it out."

v. 8 "Let us keep continual festival, but let there be no trace of leaven among us. *Out* with malice and wickedness! It is to have no place in the Christian church. *In* with sincerity and truth!"

v. 9 "I am not telling you anything new. I have already told you not to keep company with fornicators."

v. 10 "This cannot apply as far as your living in this world is concerned, otherwise you would have to leave it!"

v. 11 "But as for professing Christians, it is a different matter. If *they* live in fornication, you are to have nothing whatever to do

with them. You are to end social interaction with them to the point where you no longer even eat with them. And the same applies to professing Christians who commit parallel sins."

v. 12 "Those outside the communion of the church are beyond my jurisdiction, but it is *your* responsibility as a local church to discipline members who do not walk worthy of the gospel that they claim to profess."

v. 13 "Outsiders are not subject to the church's discipline; God alone deals with them. But the wicked person in your midst must be put out of fellowship." (The plural verb shows that Paul is asserting that this act is something in which everyone in the body is to share.)

Thus, briefly, runs the thread of 1 Corinthians 5. The chapter inculcates principles which shine out clearly. The first is that *excommunication is the prerogative and duty of the gathered local church*, and not of the civic power, or any external authority. It is something inflicted by the "many" (2 Cor. 2:6). Other New Testament references seem to indicate that an apostle could excommunicate. But this is not what happened here, for Paul tells the Corinthian church that it should have acted without any prompting from him. Although he gave the church the benefit of his own spiritual judgment, he did not come to conduct the excommunication, but commanded *them* to do it. Just as the local church is the admitting body, so also it is the expelling body. "Excommunication without consent of the church is a mere nullity," said John Owen. It is an act of the gathered body.

Further, the chapter teaches the *precise meaning and import of excommunication*.[1] Paul puts it in five different ways. It is a taking away from among the body (v. 2); a delivering unto Satan (v. 5); a purging out (v. 7); an ending of social interaction (v. 11); and a putting away from among themselves (v. 13). Most of these descriptions are readily understandable, except for the phrase "to deliver such a one to Satan..." in verse 5, which has caused much difficulty.

To understand this expression we must remember that all men and women are either under Satan, or in Christ. When we receive a person into church membership we are declaring that we have sufficient grounds to believe his profession to be a Christian. We are

[1] Those who want to know more should read Jonathan Edwards' *Works*, Volume 2, page 118, where there is an excellent sermon on "The nature and end of excommunication."

aware that only "the Lord knows those who are His (2 Tim. 2:19)". Yet we declare that as far as man can ascertain, he has the marks of a regenerate man. We therefore welcome him into the fellowship of the church.

By that act we do not *make* him a believer, nor do we deliver him from Satan unto Christ. Rather, we *declare* that we have sufficient grounds to receive him as a brother in Christ, and do so. This does not necessarily mean that everyone in our church is regenerate. But we receive him because we hold that we have sufficient grounds for *believing* him to be regenerate.

Excommunication is obviously the exact opposite of this procedure. By it the church pronounces the offender to have sinned so grievously against the law of Christ as to forfeit the right to belong to the fellowship of the church. We declare that as far as we are able to judge the matter, he has ceased to show the marks of a regenerate man.

In the act of excommunication we do not *make* him an unbeliever, nor do we deliver him from Christ unto Satan. Rather, we *declare* that we do not have sufficient grounds to continue to receive him as a brother in Christ, and act accordingly. We no longer consider him to be one with us.

This does not necessarily mean that everyone expelled from the church is unregenerate, for, if it did, Paul's words in verse 5 would be meaningless. But we expel him because we do not hold that we have sufficient grounds for *believing* him to be regenerate.

Hence, excommunication is not a dogmatic declaration as to a person's eternal destiny. But it is an act of expulsion, and the most grave and solemn censure the church can exercise, done in direct obedience to the word of God. As before, its intention is in no way punitive, but restorative. The church hopes that such action will awaken the expelled person to the dreadful danger of his position, and prays that the excommunication will be the means to bring about his repentance, and his return to the Saviour, the Head of the church.

In 1 Corinthians 5:5 Paul is teaching that as long as the man concerned is linked to the church, he is under the restraints of its admonition and so forth. But when he is put out, it is as if he had never been part of it (Mt. 18:17). The restraints of church fellowship cease to operate. Paul's hope is that the misery and disastrous effects

of unrestrained sinning will cause the prodigal to come to his senses, and to return to his Father's house and be ultimately saved.

When, then, is excommunication to be effected? It is to be used when a person, having committed some gross sin which has been proved beyond dispute, remains impenitent (1 Cor. 5). As we have also seen, it is to be used when admonition and suspension fail to cause the erring member to renounce his iniquity. In addition, it is to be used when a person is found to be heretical in some fundamental point of revealed truth, and will not be corrected (1 Tim. 1:19-20; Tit. 3:10).

All this is, in summary, the work of corrective discipline. It is not the work of the magistrate, but of the brotherhood. It cannot possibly be done unless each church member is aware of his responsibilities. The immediate need in our churches is that pastors should give clear teaching on this subject to their congregations, and then seek to implement the instructions of Scripture. To reverse the order would be to court disaster and to create divisions.

The Manner

We must now give attention to the manner or spirit in which this work of corrective discipline is to be done. Our attitude is all-important. Ours is a ministry of restoration and healing. We must not do the right thing in the wrong way.

First of all, *we must be clear as to the precise areas in which corrective discipline may operate*. The church is not an autonomous body making its own laws, but is the servant of Christ, called upon to apply His laws. This means that nothing can ever be the subject of admonition, suspension or excommunication unless it is indisputably contrary to the law of Christ as stated in the Scriptures.

Corrective discipline cannot therefore be used to infringe another Christian's liberty. Restrictions on Christian liberty are to be self-imposed. A man is to reflect on what his own conscience will allow, on the good of his brother, and on the effects of his actions on unbelievers. The most we can do is to bring such considerations before him. The final issue lies with him, and not with us. His continuing enjoyment of his liberty cannot be the cause of any censure, even if it should be unspeakably distasteful to us personally, and contrary

to local custom or church tradition. We have no mandate to implement discipline unless what is being done is inherently sinful. We must avoid legalism at all cost. We must also avoid laxity. A believer may drink, but he may not become a drunkard. Should he do so, or should something parallel occur, we have scriptural authority to act (1 Cor. 5:11).

Nor can corrective discipline deal with inward sins, but only with those which are outward and manifest. The word of God thunders against covetousness, pride, selfishness and envy. But unless these inward sins lead to some outward shame there is nothing that can be done about them, except by the formative discipline of biblical preaching. It is only against outward sins which are clearly wrong beyond all argument that action can be taken. This includes all manifest transgressions of the Ten Commandments, such as idolatry, blasphemy, witchcraft, profanity, desecration of the Sabbath, dishonour to parents, murder, adultery, theft, and lying.

In addition, corrective discipline may move against errors in foundation doctrines which destroy the integrity of the gospel (Gal. 1). But we must be careful to realise that not all doctrinal differences threaten the integrity of the gospel. Here there must be forebearance. It is useful for a local church to have a confession outlining what it considers to be the fundamentals of the faith. Those who cannot subscribe to this are not to be admitted to fellowship, and those who cease to subscribe are to be excluded.

Finally, there is contumacy, and all else that sets out to divide the body by sowing seeds of dissension and disaffection. Men who engage in this are carnal men, who will not inherit the kingdom of heaven, and the local church is to act against them (Gal. 5:19-21; Jude 19; Rom. 16:17-18).

It is vital to keep within these limits, avoiding both legalism and laxity. If this is not done, corrective discipline becomes a means of oppression, a perpetrator of harm, and a stimulant to bigotry. It becomes an inquisition, and an undue meddling in private affairs. If it is confined to manifest sins which *beyond argument* are condemned by Scripture, its administration becomes "plain and easy" (John Owen).

Secondly, *we must be clear as to precisely what spirit the Scriptures do demand of us* as we give ourselves to this work. We must underline again that the purpose and object of corrective discipline

is the restoration of the offender. When this is forgotten we usurp God's prerogatives stated in Romans 12:19 and 14:4, and become ministers of vengeance, appointing ourselves as judges over others.

This work is to be done with meekness, "considering yourself" (Gal. 6:1). We approach the restoration of another conscious of our own failures and inconsistencies, our own likelihood to fall into temptation, and our own continuing weakness. We are not beyond falling, and we are not to give the impression that we are. But neither are we to drift into laxity by letting the knowledge of our own weakness keep us from the work which Christ has commanded us to do!

As our object is edification, and not destruction (2 Cor. 10:8), it is absolutely essential that we do not treat each erring brother alike. There is the greatest possible difference between the young believer and the hardened anarchist, between the doubter and the heretic. A harsh rebuke may be needed to help one, whereas even a mild rebuke to another may fill him with overmuch sorrow. "And on some have compassion, making a distinction (Jude 22)."

Even those who have committed identical sins cannot be treated in exactly the same way. We need to take into account our brother's temperament, his standing in grace, his family circumstances, his intellectual grasp, and countless other things. Our purpose is to gain this brother! Different treatment to different people must not be regarded as "favouritism" or "partiality". Our people must be taught this; and the integrity of office-bearers dealing with individual cases must be strenuously defended from such accusations.

No doubt we shall err a great deal as we seek to do this work. Let us determine that we shall always err on the side of charity. It is better to deal too kindly with one who needed a sterner rebuke, than to quench the smoking flax or to break the bruised reed.

And let us realise that all that we do is utterly fruitless without the blessing of God. The work must therefore be done with much prayer. We must constantly be at the throne of grace, beseeching the Saviour of sinners that this means of grace, by His blessing, may be effectual to the restoration of the person involved. The sign of restoration is that the brother hears and repents. If he is under suspension, or has been excommunicated, he is to be immediately restored. Christ's body must not be slower to receive the penitent than Christ Himself is!

The New Testament does not teach that any public confession or ceremony is to accompany or follow restoration. Public confessions of sin are undoubtedly hurtful, both morally and spiritually. 2 Corinthians 2:6-8 is the only passage bearing directly on the subject of restoration, and there the emphasis is that the church is to receive the penitent, and to confirm its love toward him – the love which all along has led the church to proceed with the practice of discipline.

Restoration is only a problem where censure has been done in the wrong spirit. No rules need be given for it, any more than a family needs rules as to how it should treat a wayward member who returns, or a father needs rules as to how he should receive a repentant son. Where there has been love for the offender all along, embarrassment or awkwardness when he is restored is quite out of place.

Expectations

What may a church which implements corrective discipline expect? It would not be difficult to give specific examples of what follows, but we shall confine ourselves to general statements.

It may expect *misunderstanding*. Because most Christians are ignorant of the nature and intentions of church discipline, very many will assume that the church has engaged in something punitive. It will not occur to them that brotherly love has been the motive, and that restoration is the object. "The ban (i.e. excommunication) is a great work of love; notwithstanding, it is looked upon by the foolish as an act of great hatred," wrote Menno Simons. Where sin is unchallenged, churches are sometimes commended by others for their love! But where there is love enough to warn an erring brother, and, if necessary, to discipline him, cruel misunderstandings may abound.

It may expect *a broken heart*. Some whom it trusts the most will bring it the most grief. Some whom it has valued supremely will be the very people it will have to excommunicate. Those who have sensitive spirits may find that the pain of seeking to restore erring members may permanently affect their health. In this work there is a price to pay, and a burden to bear. Even today there is such a thing as losing one's life for Christ's sake and the gospel's.

It may expect *opposition*. Did not Jonathan Edwards suffer greatly

for taking his stand over the Lord's Supper? We shall not fare differently. Those who refuse to hear the church as it seeks to correct are often those who afterwards seem to have only one resolve – to ruin the church; and to bring down its office-bearers in general, and its minister in particular. There are few who are able to withstand such opposition unmoved.

Despite all this, the church may expect *joy*! Who can tell the joy which is brought to a congregation when a disciplined member evidences godly sorrow, and is fully restored! Who can tell the joy brought to the oversight, which has prayed and worked hard and longed for such a result? There is balm enough in the restoration of a single sinner to heal all the wounds inflicted in the course of exercising corrective discipline.

Conclusion

Where, then, are we to get the will-power to ensure that this important work is done?

Concern for the glory of God should give it. God has designed the church on the pattern of His own character. It is to reflect His glory. It cannot do this if it is indifferent to sin, and if it is making no attempt to restore its sinning members.

Concern for the purity of the church should give it. Do we really want to see the visible body of Christ filled with heresy, hatred, immorality, and all kinds of wickedness?

Concern for the good of men's souls should give it. To separate an offending church member from the warmth and light of the church fellowship is a grievous thing, a bitter medicine given in the hope that renewed spiritual health will result from its use. The action of the church is the outcome of love.

These three concerns should give us the necessary will-power. The difficulty is that we are not always concerned in depth. Consequently the work does not get started, or is done only intermittently. The only true starting-place is a recovery of the fear of God, and of our future accountability. "Each of us shall give account of himself to God (Rom. 14:12)", but ministers will have to give a particular account as to *how they have watched for their people's souls (Heb. 13:17)!*

We need constantly to call to mind that our Lord requires that we do this work, whether we are praised or opposed. Nothing less can give us sufficient impetus to carry the work through. Nothing else will generate the necessary moral fibre, resolution and determination. We need to labour that we may be accepted of *Him*!

Appendix B: A BAPTIST APOLOGY

[*Appendix to the 1677 Confession*: The word 'Apology' means 'Defense'. The original was just entitled, 'An Appendix'. Here, the spelling has been modernised. Latin quotations from the Bible commentator, Dr. Lightfoot (see below), have been omitted, leaving only their English translations. Archaic words and expressions are placed in italics, the meanings of which are given in square brackets.]

Whosoever [Whoever] reads, and impartially considers, what we have in our foregoing Confession declared, may readily perceive, that we do not only *concenter* [concur, agree] with all other true Christians on the word of God, (revealed in the Scriptures of truth) as the foundation and rule of our faith and worship. But that we have also industriously endeavoured to manifest, that in the fundamental articles of Christianity we *mind* [are concerned for] the same things, and have therefore expressed our belief in the same words, that have on the like occasion been spoken by other societies of Christians before us.

This we have done, that those who are desirous to know the principles of religion which we hold and practise, may take an estimate from ourselves, (who jointly concur in this work) and may not be misguided, either by *undue* [uncalled for, improper] reports, or by the ignorance or errors of particular persons, who going under the same name with ourselves, may give an occasion of scandalizing the truth we profess.

And although we do differ from our brethren, who are paedobaptists, in the subject and administration of baptism, and such other

circumstances as have a necessary dependence on our observance of that ordinance, and do *frequent* [come often to] our assemblies, for our mutual edification, and discharge of those duties and services which we owe unto God, and in His fear, to each other: yet we would not be from *hence* [this] misconstrued, as if the discharge of our own consciences *herein* [in this matter], did any ways *disoblige* [make insensitive] or alienate our affections or *conversation* [interaction] from any others, that fear the Lord; but that we may, and do, as we have opportunity, participate of the labours of those, whom God has endued with abilities above ourselves, and qualified and called to the ministry of the word, earnestly desiring to approve ourselves to be such as follow after peace with holiness; and therefore we always keep that blessed *irenicum* [promotion of peace], or healing word of the apostles, before our eyes; "If in anything you be otherwise *minded* [think otherwise], God shall reveal even this unto you. Nevertheless, *whereto* [to the degree that] we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us *mind the same thing* [be of the same mind] (Phil 3:15, 16)."

Let it not therefore be judged of us, (because much has been written on this subject, and yet we continue this our practice different from others) that it is out of obstinacy; but rather, as the truth is, that we do *herein* [in this matter], according to the best of our understanding, worship God out of a pure mind, yielding obedience to His precept, in that method which we take to be most agreeable to the Scriptures of truth, and primitive practice.

It would not *become* [be fitting for] us to give any such *intimation* [impression], as should carry a *semblance* [an appearance], that what we do in the service of God is with a doubting conscience, or with any such *temper* [state] of mind, that we do thus for the present, with a reservation, that we will do otherwise *hereafter* [in the future] upon more mature deliberation; nor have we any *cause* [reason] so to do, being fully persuaded, that what we do is agreeable to the will of God. Yet we do heartily propose this, that if any of the servants of our Lord Jesus, shall, in the spirit of meekness, attempt to convince us of any mistake, either in judgment or practice, we shall diligently ponder his arguments; and account him our *chiefest* [best] friend, that shall be an instrument to convert us from any error that is in our ways, for we cannot wittingly do anything against the truth, but all things for the truth.

And therefore we have endeavoured seriously to consider, what has been already offered for our satisfaction in this point; and are loath to say anymore, lest we should be *esteemed* [thought] desirous of renewed contests *thereabout* [around that point]: yet, for as much as it may justly be expected, that we show some reason, why we cannot *acquiesce in* [agree with] what has been urged against us, we shall, with as much brevity as may *consist with plainness* [accord with plain speaking], endeavour to satisfy the expectation of those that shall peruse what we now publish in this matter also.

1. As to those Christians who consent with us, "that repentance from dead works, and faith towards God, and our Lord Jesus Christ, is required in persons to be baptized"; and do therefore supply the defect of the infant (being incapable of making confession of either) by others, who do undertake these things for it. Although we do find by church history, that this has been a very ancient practice; yet considering, that the same Scripture which does caution us against censuring our brother, with whom we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ, does also instruct us, "that every one of us shall give an account of himself to God", and "*whatsoever* [whatever] is not of faith is sin" (Rom. 14:4, 10, 12, 23). Therefore we cannot for our own parts be persuaded in our own minds, to build such a practice as this, upon an unwritten tradition: But do rather choose, in all points of faith and worship, to have recourse to the Holy Scriptures, for the information on our judgment, and regulation of our practice; being well assured, that a conscientious *attending thereto* [attention to that], is the best way to prevent and rectify our defects and errors (2 Tim. 3:16, 17). And if any such case happen to be debated between Christians, which is not plainly determinable by the Scriptures, we think it safe to leave such things undecided, until the second coming of our Lord Jesus; as they did in the church of old, until then should arise a priest with *Urim* and *Thumim*, that might certainly inform them of the mind of God *thereabout* [on that matter] (Ezra 2:62, 63).

2. As to those our Christian brethren who do ground their arguments for infant baptism, upon a presumed federal holiness, or church membership, we *conceive* [are of the opinion that] they are deficient in this, that *albeit* [even if] this covenant holiness and membership should be as is supposed, in reference unto the infants of believers; yet no command for infant baptism does immediately and

directly result from such quality, or relation.

All instituted worship receives its sanction from the precept, and is to be thereby governed in all the necessary circumstances *thereof* [from there].

So it was in the covenant that God made with Abraham and his seed. The sign *whereof* [of which) was appropriated only to the male, *not withstanding* [regardless of the fact] that the female seed, as well as the male, were *comprehended* [included] in the covenant, and part of the church of God; neither was this sign to be affixed to any male infant, till he was eight days old, *albeit* [although] he was within the covenant from the first moment of his life; nor could the danger of death, or any other supposed necessity, warrant the circumcising of him before the set time, nor was there any *cause* [reason] for it; the *comminution* [threat] of being cut off from his people, being only upon the neglect, or contempt of the precept.

Righteous Lot was *nearly* [closely] related to Abraham in the flesh, and contemporary with him, when this covenant was made; yet in as much as he did not descend from his loins, nor was of his household family, (although he was of the same household of faith with Abraham) yet neither Lot himself, nor any of his posterity, (because of their descent from him) were *signed* [marked out] with the *signature* [sign] of this covenant, that was made with Abraham and his seed.

This may suffice to show, that when there was both an express covenant, and a sign *thereof* [of that], such a covenant as did separate the persons with whom it was made, and all their offspring from all the rest of the world, as a people holy unto the Lord, and did constitute them the visible church of God, (though not *comprehensive of* [encompassing] all the faithful in the world) yet the sign of this covenant was not affixed to all the persons that were within this covenant, nor to any of them till the *prefixed season* [appointed time]; nor to other faithful servants of God, that were not of descent from Abraham. And consequently, that it depends purely upon the will of the Lawgiver, to determine what shall be the sign of his covenant, unto whom, at what *season* [time] and upon what terms, it shall be affixed.

If our brethren do *suppose* [think] baptism to be the seal of the covenant which God makes with every believer, (of which the Scriptures are altogether silent) it is not our concern to contend with them

herein [in this place]; yet we *conceive* [believe, are of the view that] the seal of that covenant is the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ in the particular and individual persons in whom He resides, and nothing else, neither do they or we suppose, that baptism is in any such manner substituted in the place of circumcision, as to have the same (and no other) latitude, extent, or terms, than circumcision had; for that was suited only for the male children: baptism is an ordinance suited for every believer, whether male or female. That extended to all the males that were born in Abraham's house, or bought with his money, equally with the males that proceeded from his own loins; but baptism is not so far extended in any true Christian church that we know of, as to be administered to all the poor *infidel* [unbelieving] servants, that the members *thereof* [of the church] purchase for their service, and introduce into their families; nor to the children born of them in their house.

But we *conceive* [believe] the same parity of reasoning may hold for the ordinance of baptism, as for that of circumcision, Exodus 12:49, namely, one law for the stranger, as for the home-born: if any desire to be admitted to all the ordinances and privileges of God's house, the door is open; upon the same terms that any one person was ever admitted to all, or any of those privileges, that belong to the Christian church, may all persons of *right challenge* [rightfully claim] the *like* [same] admission.

As for that text of Scripture, Romans 4:11, "He received circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith, which he had *yet being* [while still] uncircumcised;" we *conceive* [believe], if the apostle's *scope* [primary purpose] in that place be duly attended to, it will appear, that no argument can be taken from *thence* [there] to *enforce* [support] infant baptism; and for as much as we find a full and fair account of those words, given by the learned Dr. Lightfoot, (a man not to be suspected of partiality in this controversy) in his *Hor. Hebrai*, on the 1 Corinthians 7:19, pp. 42, 43, we shall *transcribe* [quote] his words *at large* [in full], without any comment of our own upon them.

> Circumcision is nothing, if we *respect* [take into consideration] the time, for now it was without use, that end of it being especially fulfilled, for which it had been instituted: this end the apostle declares in these words,

> Romans 4:11, *sphragida etc*. But I fear that by most translations they are not sufficiently suited to the end of circumcision, and the *scope* [primary purpose] of the apostle, *whilst* [while] something of their own is by them inserted.

And after the Doctor has represented divers versions of the words, agreeing for the most part in sense with that which we have in the Bibles, he thus proceeds:

> Other versions *are to the same purpose* [say the same thing]; as if circumcision was given to Abraham for a seal of that righteousness which he had, being yet uncircumcised, which we will not deny to be in some sense true, but we believe that circumcision had chiefly a far different *respect* [purpose].
>
> Give me leave thus to render the words: "And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of faith, which was to be in the uncircumcision." "Which was to be" (I say) not "which had been", not that which Abraham had *whilst* [while] he was yet uncircumcised, but that which his uncircumcised seed should have, that is the Gentiles, who in time to come should imitate the faith of Abraham.
>
> Now consider well on what occasion circumcision was instituted unto Abraham, setting before *thine* [your] eyes the history *thereof* [of that], Genesis 17.
>
> This promise is first made unto him, "*Thou shall* [You shall] be the father of many nations," (in what sense the apostle *explaineth* [explains] in that chapter) and then there is *subjoined* [appended] a double seal for the confirmation of the thing *to wit* [furthermore], the change of the name "Abram" into "Abraham',' and the institution of circumcision, v. 4, "Behold, as for Me, My covenant is with *thee* [you], and *thou shall* [you shall] be the father of many nations." *Wherefore* [For what reason] was his name called "Abraham"? For the sealing of His promise, "*Thou shall* [You shall] be the father of many nations."

> And *wherefore* [for what reason] was circumcision instituted to him? For the sealing of the same promise, "*Thou shall* [You shall] be the father of many nations." So that this is the sense of the apostle, most agreeable to the institution of circumcision; he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of faith, which in time to come the uncircumcision (or the Gentiles) should have and obtain.
>
> Abraham had a twofold seed, natural, of the Jews; and, faithful, of the believing Gentiles: his natural seed was signed with the sign of the circumcision, first indeed for the distinguishing of them from all other nations, *whilst* [when] they as yet were not the seed of Abraham, but especially for the *memorial* [sign of remembrance] of the justification of the Gentiles by faith, when at length they should become his seed. Therefore circumcision was of right to cease, when the Gentiles were brought into the faith, for as much as then it had obtained its last and chief end, and *thenceforth* [from that time forward] "circumcision is nothing".

Thus far he [So much from Dr. Lightfoot], which we earnestly desire may be seriously weighed, for we plead not his authority, but the evidence of truth in his words.

3. Of *whatsoever* [whatever] nature the holiness of the children, mentioned 1 Corinthians 7:12 be, yet they who do conclude, that all such children, (whether infants, or of riper years) have from *hence* [here] an immediate right to baptism, do, *as we conceive* [in our opinion], put more into the conclusion, than will be found in the premisses.

For although we do not determine positively concerning the apostle's *scope* [main purpose] in the holiness here mentioned, so as to say it is this, or that, and no other thing; yet it is evident, that the apostle does by it determine not only the lawfulness, but the expedience also of a believer's *cohabitation* [living together] with an unbeliever, in the state of marriage.

And we do think, that although the apostle's asserting of the unbelieving *yoke-fellow* [marriage partner] to be sanctified by the believer, should carry in it somewhat more than is in the bare mar-

riage of two *infidels* [unbelievers], because although the marriage covenant have a divine sanction so as to make the wedlock of two unbelievers a lawful action, and their *conjunction* [coming together] and *cohabitation* [living together] in that respect undefiled, yet there might be no ground to suppose from *thence* [that], that both or either of their persons are thereby sanctified; and the apostle *urges* [teaches, asserts] the *cohabitation* [living together] of a believer with an *infidel* [unbeliever] in the state of wedlock, from this ground, that the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the believing wife; nevertheless, here you have the influence of a believer's faith, ascending from an inferior to a superior relation; from the wife to the husband, who is her head, before it can descend to the offspring. And therefore we say, whatever be the nature or extent of the holiness here intended, we *conceive* [are of the view that] it cannot convey to the children an immediate right to baptism; because it would then be of another nature, and of a larger extent, than the root and original from whence it is derived; for it is clear, by the apostle's argument, that holiness cannot be derived to the child from the sanctity of one parent only; if either father or mother be (in the sense intended by the apostle) unholy or unclean, so will the child be also: therefore, for the production of an holy seed, it is necessary that both the parents be sanctified; and this the apostle positively asserts in the first place to be done by the believing parent, although the other be an unbeliever; and then consequentially from *thence* [there] argues, the holiness of their children. Hence it follows, that as the children have no other holiness than what they derive from both their parents; so neither can they have any right by this holiness to any spiritual privilege, but such as both their parents did also partake of: and therefore if the unbelieving parent (though sanctified by the believing parent) have not thereby a right to baptism, neither can we *conceive* [believe], that there is any such privilege derived to the children by their birth-holiness.

Besides, if it had been the usual practice in the apostle's days, for the father or mother, that did believe, to bring all their children with them to be baptised, then the holiness of the believing Corinthians children would not at all have been in question when this epistle was written; but might have been argued from their passing under that ordinance, which represented their new birth, although they had derived no holiness from their parents, by their first birth; and

would have lain as an exception against the apostle's inference, "else were your children unclean, etc." But of the sanctification of all the children of every believer by this ordinance, or any other way, than what is before-mentioned, the Scripture is altogether silent.

This may be also added; that if this birth-holiness do qualify all the children of every believer, for the ordinance of baptism; why not for all the ordinances? For the Lord's Supper, as was practised for a long time together? For if recourse be had to what the Scriptures speak generally of this subject, it will be found, that the same *qualities* [qualifications] which do entitle any person to baptism, do so also for the participation of all the ordinances and privileges of the house of God, that are common to all believers.

Whosoever [Whoever] can and does *interrogate* [question] his good conscience towards God, when he is baptised, (as everyone must do, that makes it to himself a sign of salvation) is capable of doing the same thing, in every other act of worship that he performs.

4. The arguments and inferences that are usually brought for, or against, infant baptism, from those few instances which the Scriptures afford us of whole families being baptised, are only conjectural, and therefore cannot of themselves, be conclusive on either hand: yet in regard most that treat on this subject for infant baptism, do (as they *conceive* [think]) *improve* [use] these instances to the advantage of their argument: we think it *meet* [proper] (in like manner, as in the cases before mentioned, so in this) to show the invalidity of such inferences.

"Cornelius worshipped God with all his house," the jailor, and Crispus the chief ruler of the synagogue, "believed God with each of their houses". "The household of Stephanus *addicted* [devoted] themselves to the ministry of the saints": so that thus far worshipping, and believing, runs parallel with baptism. And if Lydia had been a married person when she believed, it is probable her husband would also have been named by the apostle, as in like cases, in as much as he would have been not only a part, but the head, of that baptised household.

Who can assign any probable reason, why the apostle should make mention of four or five households being baptised and no more? Or why he does so often vary in the method of his salutations, Romans 16, sometimes mentioning only particular persons of great note, other times such, and the church in their house? The

saints were with them, and them belonging to Narcissus, who were in the Lord; thus saluting either whole families, or part of families, or any particular persons in families, considered as they were in the Lord; for if it had been an usual practice to baptise all children with their parents, there were then many thousands of the Jews which believed, and great numbers of the Gentiles, in most of the principal cities in the world, and among so many thousands, it is more than probable there would have been some thousands of households baptised; why then should the apostle in this respect *signalize* [single out] one family of the Jews, and three or four of the Gentiles, as particular instances in a case that was common? Whoever supposes, that we do wilfully *debar* [exclude] our children from the benefit of any promise, or privilege, that of right belong to the children of believing parents, they do entertain over-severe thoughts of us: to be without natural affections, is one of the characters of the worst persons, in the worst of times. We do freely confess ourselves guilty before the Lord, in that we have not with more *circumspection* [care] and diligence trained up those that relate to us in the fear of the of the Lord; and do humbly and earnestly pray, that our omissions herein may be remitted, and that they may not redound to the prejudice of ourselves, or any of ours: but, with respect to the duty that is incumbent on us, we acknowledge ourselves obliged by the precepts of God, to bring up our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, to teach them His fear, both by instruction and example, and should we *set light by this precept* [take lightly this teaching], it would demonstrate that we are more *vile* [depraved] than the unnatural heathen, that like not to retain God in their knowledge, our baptism might then be justly accounted, as no baptism to us.

There are many special promises that do encourage us as well as precepts, that do oblige us to the close pursuit of our duty *herein* [in this matter]: that God whom we serve, being jealous of His worship, threatens the visiting of the father's transgression upon the children, to the third and fourth generation of them that hate Him: yet does more abundantly extend His mercy, even to thousands (respecting the offspring and succeeding generations) of them that love Him, and keep His commands.

When our Lord rebuked His disciples, for prohibiting the access of little children that were brought to Him, that He might pray over them, lay His hands upon them, and bless them, does declare, "that

of such is the kingdom of God." And the apostle Peter, in answer to their enquiry that desired to know what they must do to be saved, does not only instruct them in the necessary duty of repentance and baptism, but does also *thereto* [in that place] encourage them, by that promise which had reference both to them, and their children: if our Lord in the fore-mentioned place, do not *respect* [consider] the qualities of children (as elsewhere) as to their meekness, humility, and sincerity, and the like, but intend also, that those very persons, and such like, *appertain* [in relation] to the kingdom of God, and if the apostle Peter, in mentioning the aforesaid promise, do respect not only the present and succeeding generations of those Jews, that heard Him, (in which sense the same phrase does occur in Scripture) but also the immediate offspring of His *auditors* [hearers]; whether the promise relate to the gift of the Holy Spirit, or of eternal life, or any grace or privilege tending to the obtaining *thereof* [of that]; it is neither our concern, nor our interest, to confine the mercies and promises of God, to a more narrow, or less *compass* [extent] than He is pleased graciously to offer and intend them; nor to have a light esteem of them; but are obliged in duty to God, and affection to our children, to plead earnestly with God, and use our utmost endeavours, that both ourselves, and our offspring, may be partakers of His mercies and gracious promises: yet we cannot from either of these texts collect a sufficient warrant for us to baptise our children before they are instructed in the principles of the Christian religion.

For, as to the instance in little children, it seems, by the disciples forbidding them, that they were brought upon some other account, not so frequent as baptism must be supposed to have been, if from the beginning believers' children had been admitted *thereto* [to that]: and no account is given whether their parents were baptised believers or not; and as to the instance of the apostle, if the following words and practice may be taken as an interpretation of the *scope* [purpose] of that promise, we cannot *conceive* [see] it does refer to infant baptism because the text does *presently subjoined* [immediately added], "Then they that gladly received the word were baptised."

That there were some believing children of believing parents in the apostle's days, is evident from the Scriptures, even such as were in their father's family, and under their parents tuition and education; to whom the apostle in several of his epistles to the churches,

gives commands to obey their parents in the Lord; and does *allure* [exhort] their tender years to *hearken to* [heed] this precept, by reminding them, that it is the first command with promise.

And it is recorded by him, for the praise of Timothy, and encouragement of parents, *betimes* [regularly] to instruct, and children early to attend to godly instruction, that *apo brêphous*, from a child he had known the Holy Scriptures.

The apostle John rejoiced greatly, when he found of the children of the elect lady walking in the truth; and the children of her elect sister join with the apostle in his salutation.

But that this was not generally so, that all the children of believers were accounted for believers (as they would have been if they had been all baptised) may be *collected* [gathered] from the character which the apostle gives of persons fit to be chosen to eldership in the church which was not common to all believers; among others, this is expressly one, namely, "If there be any having believing or faithful children", not accused of riot, or unruly; and we may, from the apostle's writings on the same subject, *collect* [gather] the reason of this qualification, namely, that in case the person designed for this office, to teach and rule in the house of God, had children capable of it, there might be first a proof of his ability, industry, and success in this work in his own family, and private capacity, before he was ordained to the exercise of this authority in the church, in a public capacity, as a bishop in the house of God.

These things we have mentioned, as having a direct reference unto the controversy between our brethren and us; other things that are more *abstruse and prolix* [profound and bombastic, complex and long-winded], which are frequently introduced into this controversy, but do not necessarily concern it, we have purposely avoided, that the distance between us and our brethren may not be by us made more wide; for it is our duty and concern, so far as is possible for us, (retaining a good conscience towards God) to seek a *more entire* [closer] agreement and reconciliation with them.

We are not insensible, that as to the order of God's house, and *entire communion therein* [overall fellowship in it], there are some things *wherein* [about which] we (as well as others) are not at a full accord among ourselves; as for instance, the known principle, and state of consciences of diverse of us, that have agreed in this Confession is such, that we cannot hold church-communion, with

any other than baptised believers, and churches constituted of such; yet some others of us have a greater liberty and freedom in our spirits that way; and therefore we have purposely omitted the mention of things of that nature, that we might *concurre* [unite], in giving this evidence of our agreement, both among ourselves, and with other good Christians, in those important articles of the Christian religion, mainly insisted on by us: and this *notwithstanding* [in spite of the fact that] we all *esteem* [consider] it our chief concern, both among ourselves, and all others, that in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours, and love Him in sincerity, to endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace; and in order *thereunto* [to achieve that], to exercise all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love.

And we are *persuaded* [convinced], if the same method were introduced into frequent practice, between us and our Christian friends, who agree with us in all the fundamental articles of the Christian faith, (though they do not so in the subject and administration of baptism) it would soon *beget* [bring about] a better understanding, and brotherly affection between us.

In the beginning of the Christian church, when the doctrine of the baptism of Christ was not universally understood, yet those that knew only the baptism of John, were the disciples of the Lord Jesus, and Apollos an eminent minister of the gospel of Jesus.

In the beginning of the reformation of the Christian church, and recovery from that Egyptian darkness *wherein* [in which] our forefathers for many generations were held bondage, upon recourse had to the Scriptures of truth, *different apprehension were conceived* [different opinions were held], which are to this time continued, concerning the practice of this ordinance.

Let not our zeal *herein* [in this matter] be misinterpreted: that God whom we serve is jealous of His worship. By His gracious providence the law *thereof* [concerning that] is continued amongst us; and we are forewarned by what happened in the church of the Jews, that it is necessary for every generation, and that frequently in every generation, to consult the divine oracle, compare our worship with the rule, and take heed to what doctrines we receive and practice.

If the Ten Commands exhibited in the popish idolatrous service-books had been received as the *entire* [complete] law of God, be-

cause they agree in number with His Ten Commands, and also in the substance of nine of them, the second commandment, forbidding idolatry, had been utterly lost.

If Ezra and Nehemiah had not made a diligent search into the particular parts of God's law, and His worship, the Feast of Tabernacles (which for many centuries of years, had not been duly observed, according to the institution, though it was retained in the general notion) would not have been kept in due order.

So may it be now as to many things relating to the service of God, which do retain the names proper to them in their first institution, but yet though *inadvertency* [unintentional instances] (where there is no sinister design) may vary in their circumstances, from their first institution. And if by means of any ancient *defection* [departure], or of that general corruption of the service of God, and interruption of His true worship, and persecution of His servants by the antichristian bishop of Rome, for many generations; those who do consult the word of God, cannot yet arrive at a full and mutual satisfaction among themselves, what was the practice of the primitive Christian church, in some points relating to the worship of God: yet in as much as these things are not of the essence of Christianity, but that we agree in the fundamental doctrines *thereof* [of it], we do *apprehend* [understand, see], there is sufficient ground to lay aside all bitterness and prejudice, and in the spirit of love and meekness to embrace and own each other *therein* [in that respect]; leaving each other at liberty to perform such other services, *wherein* [in which] we cannot *concur* [agree] apart, unto God, according to the best of our understanding.

Appendix C: AN ASSOCIATION COVENANT

[This is an updated version of what was found in RT 118.]

THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION OF REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCHES

Preamble

Churches of the same faith and gospel order, so far as is necessary to communion; as they all have drunk into and of the one and same Spirit; as they are branches of the one and same body, and hold to the one and same Head; and as they have one Lord, one faith, and one baptism; may and ought to have and enjoy fellowship and friendly association together, as occasion may require and opportunity serve. Therefore, in the discharge of those relative duties that may tend to the mutual benefit and edification of all of Christ's churches (1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 4:5; John 17:20-26), the Reformed Baptist churches in Southern California come together to form an Association of churches.

I. The Nature Of An Association Of Churches

A An Association consists of particular churches who have agreed to associate together at stated times, to obey the Word of God, to promote their own interests and the good of common causes found among them. These church are represented by delegates or messengers, which are Elders and Deacons of each church.

B Each church shall have only one vote and shall not vote on matters pertaining to itself. This will insure that no matter how small a congregation may be or how large a congregation may become, no church will ever be without an equal voice and no church will ever be able to gain the preeminence or control over the Association.

C The manifold needs of the churches, such as mutual encouragement and support, assistance of numerous types, edification, oversight, and cooperative efforts to advance Christ's kingdom, bring about the need for an Association.

D This practice of churches formally and informally associating is recommended by the apostolic practice of Acts 15 and the New Testament church practices of Galatians 1:2, Galatians 1:22, and Colossians 4:13-18; numerous historical examples such as the Abingdon Association in England and the Philadelphia Association in the United States; and the confessional position of our Baptist forefathers (see the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, Chapter 26, paragraphs 14 and 15). The spirit of Christ's saving religion, Christian prudence and wisdom further encourage this.

II. The Doctrinal Statement Of This Association

While we hold tenaciously to the inerrant and infallible Word of God as found in the 66 books of the Old and New Testaments in the Holy Bible (and this being our only source of faith and practice); we embrace and adopt the London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 as the most accurate expression of that system of doctrine taught in the Bible. This Confession, then, is the doctrinal statement and position of this Association.

III. The Purpose Of this Association

The associating thus of churches of like faith and practice is of special use and has as its purpose:

A To show visible unity to the world and churches (John 17:20-26).

B To gain a greater knowledge, communion and love with sister churches.

C To afford counsel and advice in difficult cases of varying types.

D To preserve uniformity of faith and practice within the confines of our Confession of Faith; especially in dealing with doctrinal and practical questions.

E To detect and deal with heresies, and in so doing maintain harmony and peace in the churches (1 Corinthians 14:33).

F To give financial aid and assistance when necessary.

G To curb licentiousness in the wanton abuse of church power.

H To cooperate in the spreading the gospel both at home and on foreign soil.

I To provide a place for educating our children and men called to the ministry.

J To supply pulpits of sister churches in the event one is without a teaching ruling elder/pastor.

K To in every way advance and secure the interest of Christ's saving religion and strengthen and draw closer the bonds of union and fellowship.

IV. Membership In This Association

A Churches may be admitted into this Association through due process of application. Any church holding to our Confession of Faith, agreeing with our Constitution, and conforming to the prescribed pattern for receiving churches may enter and become members of this Association.

B The prescribed pattern for receiving new churches is as follows: A church desiring membership in this Association must apply through a member church. Notice of application must be given to all member churches at least two weeks before the next scheduled meeting. At the meeting of church messengers, all officers of the applying church must appear in order to give satisfactory evidence of the church's faith, practice, and willingness to wholeheartedly support this Association. Once this is sufficiently demonstrated

the applying church shall be received into membership by the unanimous suffrage of the member churches' messengers. This shall be made formal at the fifth Sunday evening combined meeting for worship.

C Considering that the union of churches in association is a voluntary act, a voluntary union or confederation like the unforced confederation of members into a church, it follows that every church stands in the same relation to its Association as a member does to his church, and therefore is examined in the same manner on admission.

D Just as the Association may receive new churches into its fellowship, it may also exclude from the Association, any church that deviates from the Confession of Faith. (Indeed, it would be absurd to examine churches at their admission if afterward they depart from biblical faith and practice and are allowed to continue in the Association.)

E Any member church desiring to withdraw from the Association may do so by submitting a letter of resignation stating the reason(s).

V. The Power & Authority Of This Association

A Each church is independent and under the authority and control of the Lord Jesus Christ alone. No outside entity, whether it be government, religious group or even another church and its officers, has any power or jurisdiction over one of Christ's churches. Each congregation is self-governing and autonomous under the Headship of Jesus Christ and according to the Word of God.

B Nevertheless, the Association has a right to call any delinquent church to account, whether for wanton abuse of its power towards or over any of its members, neglect of attendance at the Association, or any deviation from the Word of God and the Confession of Faith in principle or practice. If satisfactory reasons are not given by the delinquent church for its actions or lack of reformation thereof, the Association has the authority to exclude that church from its connection and fellowship.

C Let it not be thought that this power of the Association over the churches in connection with it disannuls or destroys the independence of those churches. However, if any church of the associated body should become unsound in their principles, or act irregularly and disorderly, and will not do what is just and right, such a church will still remain an independent church, though an heterodox and irregular one. (It would be inconsistent and wrong for the Association to suffer such a church to continue among them, since, besides other considerations, they would become partakers of its evil deeds.)

D In cases of difficulties or differences between churches in general or among members of individual churches regarding matters pertaining to their peace, union, and edification, the Association churches willingly submit themselves to have the matter heard before the assembled Elders (see Confession of Faith, Chapter 26, paragraph 15).

1 In cases of injury to an individual member, his appeal must first be made through his local church. After due process, if his church refuses to make the matter known to the Association, the member(s) may appeal to the Eldership of a member church, which must in turn make this known to the Association.

2 Doctrinal issues, difficulties, or matters between churches can be placed on the agenda of the Association's regular meeting by the Eldership from any one of the churches.

E The delegates or messengers of the churches in the Association will convene at the next regularly scheduled meeting to hear and deal with the complaint and make their determination known to the other churches.

F The delegates thus assembled are not armed with coercive power to compel the churches to submit to their decisions nor have they any control over the acts and doings of the churches. The Association can take nothing from the transgressing church but what it gave to it. However the Association has the prerogative to publish the results of its findings as publicly as is deemed necessary for the good of the cause of Christ and for the sake of the purity of the gospel.

VI. The Functioning Of This Association

A The delegates or messengers of the churches shall meet on the last Saturday of those months having five Sundays to give an account of their particular church's spiritual state, assessing needs, goals, consulting and making plans for the future, hearing and dealing with questions and complaints, etc.

B At every Saturday meeting, the delegates shall elect a moderator and a secretary. The secretary shall keep notes of the proceeding of the meeting and shall send a copy to the Elders of each church.

C All of the churches in the Association shall meet every 5th Sunday evening for a combined meeting for worship. The meeting on the Sunday evening shall rotate from one geographical location to another in the Southern California area.

D The Association shall have an Annual Family Conference, an Annual Sovereign Grace Bible Conference (6 months before Family Conference) and an Annual All-Church Picnic (either Memorial Day or July the 4th).

E The Association shall establish a bank account in order to create a Fund for carrying out its purposes and functions. Contributions to this Fund shall be voluntary. The monies in this account shall not bring a profit to one church or individual above another.

F In the event of dissolution no member church or private individual shall be entitled to share in the distribution of any assets of this Association. Any assets of the Association upon dissolution shall be used to pay any outstanding debts. Any remaining assets shall be equally divided among the missionaries supported by the churches in the Association at the time of dissolution.

May God the Father who chose the church, and God the Son who made atonement for the church, and God the Holy Spirit who applies the redemptive work of Christ to the church bless and enlarge our churches in Christ Jesus' name. Amen.

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