
PRESBYTERIAN TRACTS

BUILT UPON THE ROCK:

A STUDY OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE
CHURCH

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Preface

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus Christ informed his apostles that he would build his church upon “this rock.” There has been some controversy through the ages regarding what Christ must have intended by that statement. The Papists, in order to bolster their unscriptural elevation of the Pope to the position of “head of the church,” have claimed that the rock must be the apostle Peter. Protestants and others have consistently denied that to be the meaning of the passage. Although it is not the intention of the authors to spend a considerable amount of space defending the Protestant view, given our title we should devote at least some introductory space to the subject.

We should note first that the Greek words “*petros*” and “*petra*,” while cognate, are not the same word. The Greek word by which Christ named Peter is a masculine noun that refers to a boulder or rock. The Greek word that refers to the rock upon which Christ will build his church is a feminine noun that means “bedrock” or at the least a large mass of rock.⁽¹⁾ The two words are admittedly similar, but they are not the same word, regardless of what one reads in the apologetic literature of the Romanists. So then, if Christ was not saying that he would build his church upon the Apostle Peter, what is the rock upon which Christ would build his church? Peter’s previous confession gives us the answer to our question.

1. There is yet another Greek word, “*lithos*,” that means stone or chunk of rock.

Just previous to Christ's announcement that he would build his church upon "this bedrock," Peter had confessed "thou art the Christ, the son of the living God." It is no secret to regular Bible students that God is referred to throughout Scripture as being the rock or refuge of his people.^[2] This is especially the case in Ephesians 2:20-22, where Christ is referred to as the "cornerstone" of the church or temple of the Lord. The cornerstone is that stone laid at the beginning of construction by which all other stones in both foundation and wall are to be measured. The cornerstone determines line, level, and plumb. It is the standard by which all else is to be built.

The authors understand the eternal Christ to be the Rock upon which the church is built. There may be other organizations built upon Peter (or rather, who think they are), but only the church is built upon the eternal Son of God. We shall go so far as to maintain that except a church is built upon the Rock of Christ, it is no church of his.

The authors

2. Deuteronomy 32:4, 15, 18, 30-31; 1 Samuel 2:2; 2 Samuel 22:2, 3, 32, 47; 23:3; Psalm 18:2, 31, 46; 28:1; 31:2, 3; 42:9; 61:2; 62:2, 6, 7; 71:3; 78:35; 89:26; 92:15; 94:22; 95:1; Isaiah 8:14; 17:10; Matthew 7:24; Luke 6:48; Romans 9:33; 1 Corinthians 10:4; 1 Peter 2:8. All Scripture references are English Bible, not Hebrew. Because 1 Corinthians 10:4 by inspiration interprets the Rock that followed Israel in the desert to be Christ, it was not necessary to detail the numerous Old Testament references to the fact of the Rock following the wilderness generation.

Introduction

It is generally recognized, and properly so, that Ezekiel 40-48 constitute a prophecy of the restoration of the church of God under Christ in the New Testament era. This restoration occurs primarily under the Old Testament symbolism of the temple, both the tabernacle and the temple being significant symbols in the Old as well as the New Testaments (Psalms 27:4; 48:1-3,12-14; 84:4; 1 Corinthians 3:17; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Timothy 3:15; Hebrews 12:22-24; 9:1ff.).

Central to this prophecy is Ezekiel 43, where we read that the glory of the Lord, which had left the old temple (Ezekiel 8:4; 9:3; 10:4,18,19; 11:22,23), will re-enter his new temple (the church) in the Person and work of Christ (vv. 3-5). Central also is Ezekiel's vision of the prince (45:7,16,17; 46:16; 48:21). The prince is none other than Christ, as clearly taught in 34:24 and 37:25, where he is referred to as "my servant David." Christ is the one who comes, as David's greater Son (Matthew 22:41-45), to reign on his throne forever (Luke 1:32,33). As divine king, Christ comes to and reigns over his church.

At the very heart of this prophecy is Ezekiel 43:10-12 (verse 11 of which the Westminster divines considered a keynote text regarding the biblical form of church government):

Son of man, describe the temple to the house of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities; and let them measure the pattern. And if they are ashamed of all that they have done, make known to them the design of the temple and its arrangement, its exits and its entrances, its entire design and all its ordinances, all its forms and all

its laws. Write it down in their sight, so that they may keep its whole design and its ordinances, and perform them. This is the law of the temple: The whole area surrounding the mountaintop shall be most holy. Behold this is the law of the temple.

Herein we have the glory of the New Testament foreshadowed. The supremacy and glory of God would appear in full splendor in Christ, by whom God would return to his temple: the church. This display of the glory of God in Christ continues as the people of God repent of their sins and acknowledge the true and living God to be their God as well. The distinguishing character of the church restored in Christ is an all-pervading holiness. Thus not only the sanctuary or temple grounds, but all around the sanctuary is “most holy.” And, according to the prophet, it is by the law of the temple, i.e., the Word of God, that Christ, the king, whose glory fills the temple (the church), governs everything in his temple – its structure, exits, entrances, all its designs, all its statues, and all its laws. This “law of the sanctuary” is written in the Bible as the inerrant and all-sufficient revelation of the will of God, so that the entire church, throughout all ages may observe its whole design and all its statues, and do them. This is the law of Christ.

The salient point is this: a church that is faithful to God must be a church faithful to his Word. In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith (25:3,4): unto his 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 particular churches...are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.” As we shall see below, a biblical church is one that is Reformed in doctrine and Presbyterian in

government. Such a church stands as a palladium of liberty and justice for all of God’s elect.

The Word “Church”

The English word “church” comes from the Greek *kuriakos*, which means “belonging to the Lord” (*Kurios*). The Dutch *kierke*, the German *kirche*, and the Scots *kirk*, all come from the same root. But the word translated “church” in the English Bible is the Greek *ekklesia* (from which we get “ecclesiastical”). Etymologically, *ekklesia* comes from *ek* (“out of”) and *kaleo* (“to call”). Thus, by word derivation, the church consists of those “called out” of the world by God to himself. In this sense, they constitute the “assembly” of God’s people. Jesus teaches this in John 15:19: “I have chosen you [the elect] out of the world.” Further support can be found in other New Testament words with the same root (e.g., *kletoi*, “chosen ones” [Romans 1:7], *eklegomai* “to choose or elect” [Mark 13:20]).

So the church may be said to consist of God’s elect from the time of Adam (Genesis 3:15,21). That Israel in the Old Covenant was the Old Testament church is obvious from passages such as Acts 7:38, where Stephen calls the chosen nation “the *ekklesia* in the wilderness,” which was with the Angel of the Lord (the pre-incarnate Second Person of the Trinity). Then in Jude 9, the Old Testament church is referred to as the body of Moses, the Old Testament mediator, just as the New Testament church is the body of her Mediator: Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:18). This interpretation of the “body of Moses” is attested by the learned Jamieson, Fausset and Brown: “Some hence explain Jude 9 as referring to this passage [Zechariah 3:1]: ‘the body of Moses’ being thus *the Jewish Church*, for which Satan contended

as his by reason of its sins; just as the ‘body of Christ’ is *the Christian Church*.”^{3}

The Westminster Confession (19:3), then, properly refers to Old Testament Israel as the “church under age,” which in the New Testament has “come of age.” Or, in the words of Calvin: “The infancy of the church lasted to the end of the law [OT], but, as soon as the gospel had been preached [NT], it immediately arrived at manhood.”^{4} Significantly, it is not two separate brides or even two related brides. Rather, Scripture presents the visible church as *essentially the same in all ages, but as maturing as God’s decrees are worked out in history, especially subsequent to Christ’s advent*.

The word *ekklesia* is frequently used in the New Testament referring to God’s people.^{5} Often certain figures are used for the church. In Colossians 1:18 and 1 Corinthians 12:12,13, she is called “the body of *Christ*.” In Ephesians 5:22-33 and Revelation 21:2, the church is pictured as the bride of *Christ*. In Ephesians 2:19, the church is God’s household. In 2 Corinthians 6:16, she is “the people and temple of *God*.” Hebrews 12:22-24 speak of the church as Mount Zion, the city of *God*. Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 3:16,17, and Ephesians 2:21,22, Paul refers to the church as the temple of the *Holy Spirit*. In this

3. Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1998) , Commentary on Zechariah 3:1.

4. John Calvin, *Commentaries*, Vols. I-XXII, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1981), *Commentary* on John 4:36.

5. The difference between the visible and the invisible (or the external and the internal aspects of the) church will be discussed below.

phraseology it is hard to miss the Trinitarian nature of the church.

Then too we find the Greek *sunagoge* (synagogue) used with reference to the church (James 2:2). This word comes from a root word meaning “to gather,” so that a synagogue is “a gathering place.” It was a place where the faithful of God gathered for worship and instruction (Exodus 18:20; Leviticus 23:3). The church is called a synagogue in the Old Testament (Genesis 28:3; Leviticus 16:5,17,33). A participial form of the verb *sunago* (to gather) is found at 1 Corinthians 5:4. Significantly, this usage of the verb is not a gathering together of the entirety of the church membership for the purpose of worship, but of the church eldership for the purpose of judging.

Another very interesting use of “synagogue” is found in Matthew 24:31, where Jesus said that he would “gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” The word “gather” (*episunago*) here is a Greek verb meaning, literally, “to synagogue,” i.e., to lead, gather, bring together. The point Jesus is making is that with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, he will send out his messengers to gather his elect into his gospel synagogue: the church. In this verse, Christ is actually citing Moses, from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament), who promised: “If any of you are driven out to the farthest parts under heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there he will bring you” (Deuteronomy 30:4). Christ came in fulfillment of prophecy to restore God’s house, the organized congregation of his covenant people. The continuity of the Old Testament people of God and the New Testament people of God is seen, then, in the fact that the destruction of the Old Testament temple did not put an end to the ingathering of the elect. Rather, it signaled the fact that the ingathering

would now be from all the nations of the earth.

The imagery of gathering is the same in the Old Testament as in the New, where the Hebrew words *qahal* and *edah* are used for the assembly of God's people (Deuteronomy 9:10; 10:4; 23:1-3; Exodus 12:3). In the Pentateuch alone there are over 150 references to Israel's "assembling" together. In the Septuagint, the words *ekklesia* and *synagoge* are used most frequently to translate these Hebrew words. The church, then, as the people of God, his holy assembly, is rooted in the Old Testament, from which it comes through to the New. This fact is demonstrated in both the temple imagery used for the New Testament church (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19; 9:13; 2 Corinthians 6:15-18; Ephesians 2:20-21; 2 Thessalonians 2:4; Revelation 3:12; 7:15; 11:1-2; 21:22) as well as the specific references to the synagogue as the place of meeting for God's people (James 2:2; Acts 9:2, 20; 13:42ff.; 18:4, 7-8; 22:19; 26:11).

Covenant Theology and the Church

Reformed theology teaches that when God created man (Adam) he entered into a "covenant of works" with him. In the words of the Confession (7:2): "The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him [as the federal head of the entire human race] to his posterity, upon perfect and personal obedience."

As we read in Romans 5, however, Adam disobeyed God. And as he was the federal or covenantal head of all mankind, his sin was imputed to the entirety of humanity. As stated in the Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q 16): "The covenant being made with Adam, not

only for himself, but for his posterity; all mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him, in his first transgression.”

All men, therefore, as a result of the Fall, are judicially guilty. Adam’s sin has been imputed to all. But as the Shorter Catechism (Q 20) teaches, God did not leave all mankind to perish in this state: “God having, out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer.” This Redeemer is Jesus Christ. And the covenant of grace, as the Larger Catechism (Q 31) says, “was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed.”

Reformed theology maintains that there is one covenant of grace that runs through the entirety of the Bible. As stated in the Confession (7:5,6): this one covenant “was differently administered in the time of the law [OT], and the time of the gospel [NT]. Nevertheless, there are not “two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under the various dispensations.”⁶

The covenant of grace was initially revealed in Genesis 3:15 with the first Messianic or “gospel promise” (the *protevangelium*), directly

6. We must be careful not to be ashamed of the term “dispensation” simply because it is used by an aberrant theology for the past 150 or so years. In English a dispensation is simply an act of giving out or dispensing something. Thus as a legal term it came to mean a regime, a rule or administration. The Confession uses the term in this legal sense.

subsequent to the Fall. According to the Confession (7:3):

Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant [of works], the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace: whereby he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved.

As Paul teaches in Ephesians 2:12, there is a thematic unity of all the covenants; he writes of “the (plural) covenants” of “the (singular) promise.” “The promise” is the covenant of grace. All of the covenants that God established with his people (e.g., Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David) are a development of the one covenant of grace. This being the case, it is not strange to assert that the church has its roots in the Old Testament. “‘The promise’ is singular, to signify that the covenant, in reality, and substantially, is one and the same at all times, but only different in its accidents and external circumstances (compare Hebrews 1:1, ‘at sundry times and in divers manners’).”⁽⁷⁾

With the coming of the New Covenant, of course, “the promise” that ran through the entirety of the Old Testament reached its fulfillment, with the advent of the Redeemer himself: Jesus Christ. As the New Testament teaches us, Christ accomplished redemption on behalf of his people, thus bringing to fruition all of the types of the earlier covenants (Hebrews 8-10). Christ is the “Amen” to all of the promises of God (2 Corinthians 1:20). In him all things “which are written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” reach their fulfill-

7. Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, *Commentary on Ephesians 2:12*.

ment (Luke 24:44).

The New Testament writings witness to the oneness of the church and Israel in numerous passages. Galatians 3, for example, teaches that both the Old and New Covenants have the same gospel message (v. 8), the same need for faith (vv. 6-11), the same cursing and blessing motif (vv. 9,10,13), the same Christ and Holy Spirit (vv. 13,14,16), substantially similar covenant promises (vv. 15-25), and in both eras true believers are called the children of Abraham (vv. 26-29). Then in Galatians 6:16 we read that the church is “the Israel of God.”

Further, Hebrews 13:8 and 1 Timothy 2:5 teach that Christ is the only Mediator for all of God’s Old and New Testament people. As stated in the Confession (8:6), the cross work of Christ reaches backward as well as forward: “Although the work of redemption was not actually wrought by Christ till after his incarnation, yet the virtue, efficacy, and benefits thereof were communicated unto the elect in all ages successively from the beginning of the world.” This is due to the fact that the Fall and the need for Christ’s cross work did not catch God “off-guard.” Rather, Scripture presents Jesus Christ to us as “the lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8), and further claims that eternal life was promised “before time began” (Titus 1:2). Because God’s plan of salvation operates from outside time, it is not an impossible thing for God to impute Christ’s righteousness to the Old Testament saints before “the days of his flesh” (Hebrews 5:7).

Then in 1 Peter 2:4-10, Peter calls the church “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation,” just as Israel was God’s “special treasure,” his “kingdom of priests,” and his “holy nation,” during the Old Testament era (Exodus 19:5,6). In the same pericope Peter equates the

building of the New Testament church with the building of the Old Testament temple. As we have seen, Paul uses the same imagery in Ephesians 2:19-22 and 2 Corinthians 6:16. Hence, it is abundantly clear, as noted above, that there are not “two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under the various dispensations.”

The Five-Fold Meaning of the Word Church

In the Bible, the word “church” (*ekklesia*) has a variety of distinct, but closely related, meanings. In fact, it can be said that the five-fold meaning of *ekklesia* is the theological and exegetical basis of presbyterian church government (which will be discussed in more detail below). First, theologians distinguish between the visible and the invisible church. As stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith (25:1,2), the invisible church “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 fullness of him that filleth all in all.” The visible church, on the other hand, consists of the baptized members of all local congregations “throughout the world.”

The invisible church, then, consists of the elect, the whole body of people, whether in heaven or on earth, who have been or shall be united savingly to Christ (Matthew 16:18,19). They constitute the true church of Christ, his bride, the ones for whom he died (Ephesians 5:25; Acts 20:28). In the words of Calvin, in his Catechism of 1536 and 1541: “What is the church? The body and society of believers whom God hath predestined to eternal life.”

The church, in this sense, cannot be confined to one denomination or

limited to one race or congregation. Believers in Christ are members of the universal church of almighty God which transcends race, gender, and nationality. Members of the invisible church are visible to God, who is the searcher of hearts (1 Samuel 16:7; Revelation 2:23), but they are not necessarily visible to us (1 Timothy 5:24,25).

There is another sense in which the word church is used which refers to the “visible church” (Acts 7:38; 1 Corinthians 1:2). In this sense, “church” is identified by those members who make a credible profession of faith in Christ, who separate themselves from the world by baptism, who partake of the Lord’s Supper, whose lives are evidenced by holiness in obedience to the Word of God, who submit to church discipline, and are faithful to the Great Commission. As we read in the Confession (25:2), “the visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the gospel [NT] (not confined to one nation as before under the law [OT]), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of 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.”

Sometimes the visible church is referred to as the church militant, as it is involved in spiritual warfare with the forces of evil (Ephesians 6:10-18). When a true (i.e., regenerate) member of the visible church dies and goes to be with the Lord, he becomes a member of the victorious church triumphant. True members of the visible church are also members of the invisible church. But there are those within the visible church who are not saved (Matthew 7:21-23; 25:1-13). That is, the invisible church does not coincide with the membership roles of the various visible churches. This is why Augustine spoke of the visible church as a “mixed body” of elect and non-elect. There are, of course,

some outside of the visible church who are God's elect. But God has placed the "ordinary means of salvation" within his visible church. Membership in the visible church should never therefore be taken lightly, as though one's belief that he is in the invisible church is a sufficient safeguard for perseverance in holiness.

The third use of *ekklesia* has to do with the local congregation, "the church on the corner." Here "church" signifies a body of those who profess the Lord Jesus Christ in any particular location together with their children, associated together under elders, in the worship and service of the triune God according to his Word and for his glory (Acts 14:23; Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19). This is the local congregation. The church of God is one; and it is also many.

Although local congregations are not autonomous and independent, "totally" complete in themselves without any connection to or dependence upon the entire visible church, nevertheless, the Bible does not speak of them as "parts of the body" or as "branches of the church." Rather, it speaks of each one as "the church" or "the body," emphasizing the fact that each assembly does have a kind of completion in itself (1 Corinthians 1:4-9). In this sense, Berkhof wrote: "Every local congregation is a complete church of Christ, fully equipped with everything that is required for its government. It has absolutely no need of it that any government should be imposed upon it from without."⁽⁸⁾

Fourth, the term "church" also signifies a number of local congregations associated together under a common confession of faith and a

8. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1939, 1941), 589.

common church government (Acts 8:3; 9:31; Galatians 1:22; Philippians 3:6; 1 Corinthians 12:28). This connectional, structural, organizational, and confessional relationship of local churches in the New Testament is also implied in the fact that there is one, visible, universal church on earth, of which all believers are a part (Hebrews 12:22-24).

In Acts 8:1, we see the Christians in Jerusalem described as “the church in Jerusalem.” Surely this “church” was made up of more than one congregation in that city, since the number of converts in Jerusalem (as well as the diversity of languages; Acts 2,6), mentioned in Acts, makes it impossible to think that they could have all met together at one local congregation meeting in a believer’s home.

Acts 6:1-2 further demonstrates this fact. Verse one informs us that a particular problem arose because the number of disciples “multiplied.” Verse two continues by informing us that it was necessary for up to twelve separate ministers (the apostles) to remain busy strictly in the work of the gospel ministry. As verse 4 implies, it was the custom of the apostles to give themselves exclusively and “continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” Had it been the case that there was only a single congregation in the city of Jerusalem, it is difficult to imagine that twelve men could not have found time to direct the work of the tables for the widows. But if there were numerous congregations, then the objection that they simply did not have time for such work without it being to the detriment of their callings makes perfect sense.

Significant also is the fact that the apostles were not simply interested in seeing their own numbers increased, but that they wanted men who

were given this task *as opposed to* the task of the ministry of the word and sacrament. Clearly six men could not have done all the work themselves, so they were not told to do all the work, but were placed “over this business” (v. 3; *epi tes chreias tautes*). This indicates the very real possibility that the daily ministrations were more than even six men could handle unassisted. Three thousand adults were baptized on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, according to Acts 2. The Lord added to their number daily (Acts 2:47). Thousands of Jews believed in Jesus there (Acts 21:20). All these numbers teach us, not that there was one monstrous, mega-congregation meeting in one location in Jerusalem; but that there was a plurality of congregations in the city connected together as one body under a common faith and government, and called “the church at Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1; see also 2:47; 14:23; 15:2,4,6; 20:17).

This biblical truth regarding the structural and organizational unity of local congregations is called “connectionalism.” No local congregation is fully autonomous in the sense of being detached from all other congregations. The church of Christ is a confederacy of churches. To show forth our unity in Christ, and to follow the pattern of the church in the Bible, congregations should be organizationally connected together, without betraying the integrity of any congregation, under a common confession of faith and common form of church government by shepherding elders (Acts 20:28).

This principle of “connectionalism” or “association” lies at the basis of the church institution and runs through the whole apostolic church system. Christian individuals and families associate together to form a church (Romans 16:3-5); individual elders associate together to form a presbytery, i.e., a session, in a local church (Acts 14:23); and con-

gregations and their elders in a particular region associate together to form a regional presbytery (1 Timothy 4:14). When all the congregations and their elders of a nation associate together for ecclesiastical purposes, it is called a general assembly (Hebrews 12:22-24).

Finally, “church” signifies a body of Christians in any locality represented by their elders (Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:4). In the Old Testament, when the elders of Israel met in official “session,” they represented the entire congregation before God, just as they represented God and his covenant to Israel. To address the elders of Israel was to address the entire congregation of the Lord. In fact, when these elders met in official session, they could be said to be the congregation of the Lord, or the children of Israel representatively (Exodus 3:13-18; 4:29-31; 19:7,8).

In Revelation chapters 4 and 5 the entire church of Christ is gathered around Christ’s throne in her representatives: the twenty-four elders, i.e., the twelve Old Testament patriarchs and the twelve New Testament apostles. Matthew 18:17 uses “church” in this sense, where we are taught that as a final resort in church discipline, we are to turn a straying member over to the “church,” i.e., the elder-representatives of the church, for their counsel, ministry, adjudication, and, if necessary, for the excommunication of the offender.

When the apostolic writers of the New Testament sent their letters to the church they sometimes addressed them to the elders of the church, as representatives of the entire membership (Philippians 1:1). Biblical church government, in other words, is representative government, i.e., ecclesiastical republicanism – a congregation governed by elder-representatives, elected by the congregation to administer the Word of

God. (This will be studied more below.)

The Attributes of the Church

In the early years of Christendom, the framers of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (A.D. 381), confessed: “[We believe] in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” Herein we have what are known as the four attributes of the church of Jesus Christ. Or said another way, they are appropriate descriptions of the church.

The Unity of the Church

The church of Christ is “one.” There is a unity of the church. In Ephesians 4:4-6 we read: “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.” The body spoken of in this passage is the church of Christ.

The Christian church is one bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:31,32; Revelation 19:7; 21:2,9,10). He is the head of his church, which is his body (Colossians 1:18). There is one foundation of the church: Christ (1 Corinthians 3:11). He is the federal or covenantal head of every member of his (invisible) church; they are in union with him; he represents them all (Romans 5:12-19). Hence, there is a “communion of the saints,” each member being in communion with the Lord and one another (1 Corinthians 10:16,17; 12).

Paul writes of the church’s corporate solidarity in Galatians 3, Ephesians 4, and 1 Corinthians 12. Says the apostle, there is a unity of the Spirit which exists within the Christian community, a unity, as we have seen, that transcends racial, sexual, and class distinction. Spirit-

tual gifts are to be used to advance God's kingdom. And yet, there is a diversity of gifts which is necessary for the body to function properly. Diversity is to exist without disunity. The main function of pastors and teachers is to preach and teach the Word of God to the laity, thereby equipping them to properly serve in Christ's kingdom (Ephesians 4:11,12).

Note is made that the unity to which the church is called is not primarily an organizational unity, but a doctrinal unity; it is a unity of mind (1 Corinthians 1:10; Philippians 1:27; 1 Peter 3:8). Along this line, Gordon Clark asserted that "it is a unity of proclamation, a unity of message, a doctrinal unity that is uppermost in Paul's exhortation [1 Corinthians 1:10]. When there is doctrinal unity, there may well be organizational unity within a city or other convenient geographical area; but without doctrinal unity, organizational union is not unity."⁹

The Holiness of the Church

The church of Christ is the "holy" nation according to both the Old Testament (Exodus 19:6) and the New (1 Peter 2:9,10). Members of Christ's church are called "saints" or "holy ones." They have been "set apart" unto God (1 Corinthians 1:1,2; Colossians 1:2; the same Greek word group: *hagios*, *hagiazō*, is used for "holy," "saints," and "set apart"). Christians are holy because they are in union with Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 6:17; Ephesians 5:31,32). They have been declared righteous (Romans 5:17-19). They have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8), and given new hearts to keep God's com-

9. Gordon H. Clark, *What Do Presbyterians Believe?* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1956, 1965), 221.

mandments (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27). As stated by Kuiper: “The church of Christ is the one and only organization in the world which is holy in this sense. That makes it incomparably the most glorious of all earthly societies. Holiness constitutes the church. The church is synonymous with holiness.”⁽¹⁰⁾

This being the case, the saints are to be involved in the pursuit of holiness (Hebrews 12:14). Their God is holy, and they are called to the same standard (Matthew 5:48; 1 Peter 1:15,16). Holiness includes love for and obedience to God’s law: Says Christ: “If you love me, keep my commandments....He who has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves me....If anyone loves me, he will keep my Word” (John 14:15,21,23).

In this sense, it is proper to speak of both the definitive and progressive holiness of the church. The church’s holiness is definitive in that it is holy in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:2; Hebrews 10:10); there is a radical breach with sin that has occurred due to his cross work in its behalf and which is pictured in the Christian sacrament of baptism, or washing. The church’s holiness is progressive, on the other hand, in that, having been declared righteous, the sanctification of the church will inevitably follow (Hebrews 10:14).

It is important to note here that the holiness (the salvation) of the elect, in its entirety, has to do with their relationship with Jesus Christ. As stated above, they are in spiritual union with him (John 15:1-8; Romans 6:3-6). The elect are in union with Christ in that he is their

10. R.B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 58.

federal head; he represents them just as Adam represented all men in the garden of Eden. According to Paul, one is either “in Adam” or “in Christ” (Romans 5:12-19; 1 Corinthians 15:22). The union that the elect have with Christ is brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). Thus, it is a “Spiritual union.” As the Shorter Catechism (Q 30) teaches, the Spirit produces belief in Christ in the minds of elect sinners: “The Spirit applies to us the redemption purchased by Christ, by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ.” Hence, the elect become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4), i.e., they “have the mind of Christ” (1 Corinthians 2:16).

Regarding the doctrine of “union with Christ,” John Murray wrote:

Union with Christ is a very inclusive subject. It embraces the wide span of salvation from its ultimate source in the eternal election of God to its final fruition in the glorification of the elect. It is not simply a phase of the application of redemption; it underlies every aspect of redemption both in its accomplishment and in its application. Union with Christ binds all together and insures that to all for whom Christ has purchased redemption he effectively applies and communicates the same.⁽¹¹⁾

There are many biblical passages which refer to the spiritual union that the true church has with Christ. Scripture teaches that the believer is identified (in union) with Christ in that he is baptized into him (1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:27); he is a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). In Ephesians 1 we read that believers are blessed in

11. John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955, 1980), 165.

Christ (v. 3), eternally chosen in him (v. 4), predestined to adoption through him (v. 5), redeemed in him (v. 7), and sealed in him by the Holy Spirit (v. 13). Ephesians 2 states that the church is made alive and raised up in Christ (vv. 5,6), created for good works in him (v. 10), and made a holy temple in him (v. 22).

Further, Colossians 2 maintains that the elect are rooted and built up in Christ (v. 7), made complete in him (v. 9), circumcised in him by being baptized into him (vv. 11,12). Scripture identifies the believer with Christ in his death (Romans 6:3), burial (Romans 6:4), resurrection (Colossians 3:1), ascension (Ephesians 2:6), reign (2 Timothy 2:12), and glory (Romans 8:17). In 1 Corinthians 1:30 we read that the Christian's righteousness, sanctification, and redemption are all related to his union with Jesus Christ. And Romans 8:28-30 summarizes the order of salvation (*ordo salutis*), and shows that it is all dependent on the believer's spiritual identification with Christ. The holiness of the church, then, is inextricably related to its relationship with Christ, its union with him.

The Catholicity of the Church

As we have already studied, the church is one and it is many. It is local, and it is universal. And there is a necessary "connectionalism" which exists in the church. The church is catholic or universal. It is not confined to any one age or race, nor restricted to one language, nationality or denomination. In Galatians 3:28 we read that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Under the New Covenant the universal church embraces all nations. As taught in the Confession (25:3): "Unto this catholic visible church Christ has given the minis-

try, 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 should be clearly stated, however, that not all groups that call themselves churches should be recognized as such. Again to cite the Confession (25:5): “The purest churches under heaven are subject to both mixture and error: and some have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will.” This is covered in greater detail below under “The Marks of a True Church of Christ.”

The Apostolicity of the Church

The church is apostolic in that it is “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20). The apostles, together with the prophets, as vehicles of verbal revelation from God, constitute the foundation of the church, with Christ being the principal support and cause of growth. Christ, not the apostles nor the prophets, sustains the entire house of God, and carries it to its consummation (Hebrews 3:1-6; 1 Corinthians 3:11). Yet, it is the Spirit revealed, written teachings of Christ’s commissioned ambassadors, the apostles, which are the doctrinal and organizational foundation of the entire Christian church throughout the ages (John 13:20; 17:20; Matthew 10:40; Luke 10:16).

Matthew 16:19 refers to this foundation as “the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” It is they which “bind and loose.” To believe in Christ is to

believe in his Word (John 5:45-47; 17:20). These apostolic writings, says Revelation 21:14, are the foundation stones of the church. It is the Word of God which establishes the church, not vice-versa (as in Roman Catholicism). The Bible is primary. *That which guarantees the church's apostolicity is conformity to the apostolic doctrines.*

The Marks of a True Church of Christ

As stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith (25:4): “This catholic church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.”

With all of the heresy, false doctrine, false preachers, and false churches in the world today, how is it possible for us to recognize the true church? Does Christ's church have clear and definite marks by which it can be identified with certainty? The answer to these questions is Yes! Reformed theology maintains that there are three definitive marks which identify a genuine church of Christ.

These marks are defined in the major Reformed creeds: Scots Confession (1560), Belgic Confession (1561), Heidelberg Catechism (1563), Second Helvetic Confession (1566), Westminster Confession (1643-1648), Savoy Declaration (1658), London Baptist Confession (1689). The marks are: the true proclamation of the Word of God, the right administration of the sacraments, and the faithful exercise of church discipline. As stated by Calvin, in a “Letter to Cardinal Sadolet”: “There are three things on which the safety of the church is founded,

namely, doctrine, discipline, and the sacraments.” When one of these marks is missing in a church, that church is no longer functioning as a “biblical church.”

The True Proclamation of the Word of God

This is the fundamental mark, the one emphasized most by the Reformers; the reason being that the Word of God is the primary “means of grace” (John 8:31,32; 14:23; 1 John 4:1-3; 2 John 9-11). In the words of Clark: “the church proclaims, defends, and propagates the gospel. Its task is to declare all of God’s truth....If the church is not the bulwark of the truth, there is no church.”⁽¹²⁾ Further, the Word of God is that by which all controversies in the church must be judged today (Acts 15:15ff), and by which all men will be judged at the last day (Romans 2:16; 16:25).

It is by means of the gospel that elect sinners come to know Christ as Savior and Lord (Romans 1:16,17). In Romans 10, Paul claims that all those who call upon the name of Christ will be saved (v. 13). But, says the apostle, they cannot call on one of whom they have never heard; “faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” (vv. 14-17).

The basic thrust of the gospel (*euangelion*, which means “good news”) is found in 1 Corinthians 15:3,4: “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.” The gospel message is the

12. Gordon H. Clark, *The Pastoral Epistles* (The Trinity Foundation, 1983), 64,65.

“good news” that Jesus Christ has merited salvation for all of God’s elect; he has accomplished their redemption.

The Reformers stressed the preaching of the Word over the sacraments, because the Word of God is a “means of grace” in itself. That is, Scripture is absolutely necessary for salvation, whereas the sacraments, as important as they are, are a “means of grace” only *with* the Word. For one cannot understand the meaning of the sacraments apart from biblical revelation. According to Calvin: “There is never any sacrament without an antecedent promise of God.”^{13} Whatever grace is conveyed by the sacraments is conveyed with the Word of God and is never a different or separate grace from that conveyed by the Word of God.

The Right Administration of the Sacraments

The second mark of a true church is the right and faithful administration of the sacraments. The Confession (27:1) defines the sacraments as “holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace, immediately instituted by God, to represent Christ and his benefits, and to confirm our interest in him; as also to put a visible difference between those that belong to the church and the rest of the world; and solemnly to engage them to the service of God in Christ, according to his Word.”

13. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vols. I & II, Library of the Christian Classics, John T. McNeill, editor, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster Press, 1960), IV:14:3.

There are two New Testament sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper, both of which were instituted by Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:19; Luke 22:14-20). We may say that these two bloodless sacraments replace the two bloody sacraments of the Old Testament: circumcision (Colossians 2:11,12; Philippians 3:3; Romans 2:28-29) and Passover (1 Corinthians 5:7; 10:15ff.). Since Christ's blood has been shed once for all of his people, there is no more need for bloody sacraments.

Baptism

Water baptism, as taught in the Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q 94), "is a sacrament, wherein the washing of water in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, doth signify and seal our ingrafting into Christ, and partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord's."

Water baptism, then, is a sign of one's entering into a covenant relationship with the Lord. Thus, it is to be administered only once. The sign of water points to the true baptism of the Holy Spirit of God (Luke 3:16). Water baptism does not regenerate (1 Peter 3:20,21), but it is symbolic of the regenerating work of the Spirit (Titus 3:5,6).

Who should receive water baptism? Reformed paedobaptists maintain, along with the Westminster Confession (28:4), that baptism is "not only [for] those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also [for] the infants of one or both believing parents." Reformed Baptists, on the other hand, teach in their Shorter Catechism (Q 98) that "baptism is to be administered to all those who credibly profess repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and to none other."

With regard to the two New Testament sacraments, the Roman Catholic Church teaches a doctrine of sacramentalism. In this false theory, grace is conveyed to the recipient *ex opere operato* (“by the work working of itself”), and is necessary for salvation. The Council of Trent defined a sacrament as “something presented to the sense, which has the power, by divine institution, not only of signifying, but also of efficiently conveying grace.” In water baptism, for example, regenerating grace is conveyed to the recipient by the act itself.

Several New Testament passages negate Rome’s teaching. First, there is the unbaptized thief on the cross (Luke 23:39-43). Second, there are John 4:2 and 1 Corinthians 1:17. From these two verses we learn that neither Jesus nor Paul were involved in baptism as an essential part of their ministry. But this could hardly be true if water baptism is necessary for salvation. Third, 1 Peter 3:21 is an outright denial that water baptism, in itself, has the power to save.

Lutheranism also teaches that baptism conveys grace to the recipient, but not *ex opere operato*. Active faith is necessary on the part of the individual receiving the sacrament, except in the case of infants. The latter, as children of believers, said Luther, possess an “unconscious faith,” i.e., a faith which does not require reasoning power, in which somehow the faith of the parents is involved.

Frankly speaking, such an assertion is nonsense. First, “unconscious faith” is an oxymoron. Faith is defined as consisting of *notitia* (idea, notion, or conception), *assensus* (agreement, consent), and *fiducia* (confidence, trust). Clearly one unable to conceive, assent, or trust is incapable of faith. But one who is “unconscious” is incapable of conceiving, assenting, and trusting. Therefore the very term “unconscious

faith” is self-contradictory. Whatever it may be argued that children know or do not know, it cannot be meaningfully stated that they possess “unconscious faith.” And second, according to Ezekiel 18, sons and daughters will not bear the guilt of their parents, and neither will they share in their righteousness. Each man, woman, and child, will stand before God and answer for himself or herself.

As far as the proper mode of baptism is concerned, most Reformed theologians agree with the Westminster Confession (28:3), and in contradistinction to the London Baptist Confession of 1689, that water baptism may be administered by immersion, pouring, or sprinkling: “Dipping of the person into water is not necessary; but baptism is rightly administered by pouring or sprinkling water upon the person.”

The Lord’s Supper

Regarding the Lord’s Supper, the Confession (29:1) says: “Our Lord Jesus, in the night wherein he was betrayed, instituted the sacrament of his body and blood, called the Lord’s Supper, to be observed in his church unto the end of the world, for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of himself in his death, the sealing of all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in him, their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto him, and to be a bond and pledge of their communion with him, and with each other, as members of his mystical body.”

The Lord’s Supper, then, is a sign of one’s abiding in a covenant relationship with the Lord. Thus, it is to be administered often. As a sign, its primary significance is that of the death of Christ and all the benefits that flow from that death. As one of the benefits that flows from

Christ's death is the sanctification of all those that are truly his, it points also to the work of God's Spirit in sanctification (2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2). Reformed theology generally recognizes a three-fold aspect to the Supper:

Past: When the Christian "by faith" partakes of the elements of the Lord's Supper, he looks back on and remembers the sacrifice of Christ that merited his salvation. In this sense the Supper is a memorial; it is "for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of himself in his death." Jesus instructed his church to "do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19).

Present: When the Christian "by faith" takes the Supper he feeds on Christ for his "spiritual nourishment and growth in him." At the Lord's Supper the elements take on special significance: the bread represents the body of Christ and the wine represents his blood (1 Corinthians 11:23-25). When the elements are consecrated or set apart for the sacrament, by prayer and the ministry of the Word, there is a sacramental union that occurs between the elements and that which they represent. And "worthy receivers," as the Confession (29:7) teaches, as they outwardly partake of the bread and wine, "do then also inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually, receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death."

The fact that believing recipients receive spiritual nourishment at the Supper means, as the Larger Catechism (Q 177) says, that it "is to be administered often...to confirm our continuance and growth in him." The New Testament writings indicate that the early church partook of the Supper as often as they gathered for worship (Acts 2:42-47; 20:7;

1 Corinthians 5:7,8; 11:17-34). This being the case, it is apparent that a weekly celebration (i.e., each Lord's day) of the Lord's Supper should be the norm for the church today.

Future: The Lord's Supper is "to be observed in his church until the end of the world." Hence, when Christians "by faith" partake of the Supper, they do so looking forward to the second advent of Christ, when all of God's people will participate in the great marriage supper of the Lamb (Matthew 26:29; 1 Corinthians 11:26; Revelation 19:7-9).

Who is it that should partake of the Lord's Supper? As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 11:23-32, the Lord's Supper is for those who belong to the Lord. It is for those who are seeking to live a godly life in accordance with his commandments. Hence, as we read in the Shorter Catechism (Q 97): "It is required of them that would worthily partake of the Lord's Supper, that they examine themselves of their knowledge to discern the Lord's body, of their faith to feed upon him, of their repentance, love, and new obedience; lest coming unworthily, they eat and drink judgment to themselves."

Within (so called) Christian circles there is a variance of opinion regarding the "presence of Christ" at the Supper. Roman Catholicism teaches the false doctrine of transubstantiation, i.e., that Christ is physically present in the elements, due to the "miracle" of the mass. According to this false theory, when the ministering priest blesses the elements, they are miraculously transformed into the actual body and blood of Christ. Romanism teaches that it is the substance, not the accidents, which is transformed (as per Aristotle's metaphysics, adopted by Thomas Aquinas). So the elements retain their shape, tex-

ture, taste, etc., whereas the substance changes. Only an ordained priest (sacerdotalism) can bring about this “miracle.”

Partaking of the Eucharist (Lord’s Supper) in this fashion atones for venial (not mortal) sins (as per Rome’s distinction). The reason for this, states Rome, is that each Eucharist is a mass, i.e., an actual re-sacrifice of Christ. The Council of Trent states: “in this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the mass, that same Christ is contained and immolated...this sacrifice is truly propitiatory...wherefore, not only for the sins, punishments, satisfactions, and other necessities of the faithful who are living, but also for those who are departed in Christ and who are not as yet fully purified, it is rightly offered.”

This is plain and simple heresy. First, according to Scripture, Christ cannot be re-sacrificed; he died once to atone for the sins of the elect (Hebrews 9:28; 1 Peter 3:18). Second, regarding the institution of the Lord’s Supper in the Upper Room (Luke 22:14-20), it is manifestly absurd to believe that Jesus claimed to be holding his own body and blood in his fleshly hand. Third, in 1 Corinthians 10:16,17 and 11:26-28, Paul refers to the elements as elements, even after the supposed change has occurred. Paul stated, for instance in 1 Corinthians 10:16 that what we break is *bread*. In 1 Corinthians 11:26 he went so far as to maintain that what the worshippers were eating was bread.

Lutheranism teaches the erroneous doctrine of consubstantiation, i.e., that Christ’s presence is physical “in, with, and under” the elements. Luther rejected sacerdotalism and the mass. But he still wrongly maintained a position which necessitates the ubiquity of the Lord’s human body. Such, of course, is contrary to true humanity and would deny the dual natures of Christ.

A third errant view is that of Zwinglianism (although it is questionable whether Zwingli himself held to what is here described). This view avers that Christ is spiritually present at the Supper, but claims it is only a memorial or commemoration of Christ's death. Thus, it is *merely* a sign or symbol, in which the elements only represent Christ's body and blood. First Corinthians 10:16,17, however, teaches otherwise: believers actually "feed" upon Christ at the Supper. The Zwinglian concept of the Lord's Supper would implicitly obviate the "present" feature of the three-fold aspect mentioned above in the Reformed view.

Reformed theology teaches that Christ is really, yet spiritually, present at the Lord's Supper. Hence, as stated in the Confession (29:7), "worthy receivers, outwardly partaking of the visible elements in this sacrament, do then also inwardly by faith, really and indeed, yet not carnally and corporally, but spiritually, receive and feed upon Christ crucified, and all benefits of his death: the body and blood of Christ being then not corporally or carnally in, with, or under the bread and wine; yet as really, but spiritually, present to the faith of believers in that ordinance, as the elements themselves are to their outward senses."

The Faithful Exercise of Church Discipline

The third mark of a true church is the faithful and loving exercise of church discipline (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:1-5,13; 14:33,40; Revelation 2:14-16). This is necessary for the maintenance of the purity of doctrine and life of the church. As stated by Berkhof: "Churches that are lax in discipline are bound to discover sooner or later within their circles an eclipse of the light of the truth and an

abuse of that which is holy.”^[14]

The church, by means of its elected elders, is responsible to oversee its members (1 Peter 5:1-4). The authority granted to the church by Christ includes the power to apply church discipline, to admit and exclude from the fellowship of the church, and to govern the conduct of the members while they continue members. The discipline involved is not a physical discipline, nor is any of its applications corporeal. It is a spiritual discipline, and as such is strictly ministerial and declarative.

When unrepentant sinners exist within a congregation, church discipline becomes necessary. Christ gave directions for church discipline in Matthew 18:15-20. There we read of a three-fold procedure in the disciplinary process. The first and second of these are to be carried out by the church members themselves; the third is to be handled by the ruler-representatives of the church. First, the sinner is to be approached by the offended party alone. If this does not lead to repentance on the part of the offending party, then the second step is to involve witnesses. If the disciplinary actions of the church members fail, and there is still no repentance, then finally the matter is to be handled at the church level. In this third phase, the church is represented by the elders, i.e., the church “session.” In all cases of private grievances, these steps should be followed. However, in the case of public sins where there is not a single aggrieved party, but the honor of the whole of the church of Christ is involved, it may become necessary for the church session to be the party bringing complaint.

14. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 578.

Whenever repentance is manifested in the process, the sinner is to be forgiven and restored to fellowship within the church. If there is no repentance manifested, then, as taught by the Confession (30:4), “the officers of the church are to proceed by admonition, suspension from the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper for a season, and by excommunication from the church, according to the nature of the crime [i.e., sin], and demerit of the person.”

The Bible teaches that church discipline serves three purposes: the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31), the purity of the church (1 Corinthians 5:4-8), and the restoration of the sinner (2 Corinthians 2,7). In his “Letter to the Duke of Somerset,” Calvin wrote: “As doctrine is the soul of the church for quickening, so discipline and the correction of vices are like the nerves to sustain the body in a state of health and vigor.”

It should be noted that while all three of the marks studied in this section are indeed proper tests of the true church of Christ, they are not equally important. That is, the second and third mark are necessary for the “well being” of the church, but they are not necessary for the “being” of the church. Only the true proclamation of the Word of God is necessary for the “being” of the church. It is the Word which determines the right administration of the sacraments and the faithful exercise of church discipline. Without the second and third marks a church is not functioning as a biblical church. But without the first mark there is no church of Christ at all. Says Calvin: “This is the abiding mark with which our Lord has sealed his own: ‘everyone who is of the truth hears my voice.’”^{15}

The Authority of the Church

It is Christ himself who teaches us that all authority in heaven and earth has been given unto him (Matthew 28:18). This authority has been entrusted to him as one aspect of his messianic or mediatorial investiture by the Father (Matthew 11:27; Luke 22:29; John 5:22,27; 17:2). And as Paul writes in Colossians 1, Christ is not only the sovereign creator and ruler of the universe (vv. 15-17), he is also the one who has full and sole authority over his church (vv. 18-20). This being so, we are assured, as taught in the Confession (25:6), that “there is no other head of the church, but the Lord Jesus Christ.”

But Christ also teaches that flowing out of his authority, he has given authority to his apostolic band to disciple the nations (Matthew 28:18,19). This, of course, is the authority of the apostolic writings, which as we have already studied, are the foundation of Christ’s church (Ephesians 2:20). Thus, the Confession (25:3) rightly states: “unto this catholic 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.”

In the church, Christ’s Word alone is law (James 4:12). The Bible and the Bible alone is the regulating, governing, authoritative standard for the church’s worship and work. To cite Ezekiel 43 (studied above), it is the law of the temple, by which the entire design of the temple is to

15. Calvin, *Institutes* IV:2:4.

be determined.

The biblical view of the authority of the church is very well stated in the preface of the *Book of Church Order* of the Presbyterian Church in America:

Jesus Christ, upon whose shoulders the government rests, whose name is called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace; of the increase of whose government and peace there will be no end; who sits upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom to order it and to establish it with judgment and justice from henceforth, even forever (Isaiah 9:6,7); having all power given unto him in heaven and earth by the Father, who raised him from the dead and set him at his own right hand, far above all principalities and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come, and has put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all (Ephesians 1:20-23); he, being ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things, received gifts for his perfecting of his saints (Ephesians 4:10-12).

Jesus, the Mediator, the sole Priest, Prophet, and King, Savior, and Head of the church, contains in himself, by way of eminency, all the offices in his church, and has many of their names attributed to him in the Scriptures. He is Apostle, Teacher, Pastor, Minister, Bishop, and the only Lawgiver in Zion.

It belongs to his Majesty from his throne of glory to rule and teach the church through his Word and Spirit by the ministry of men; thus mediately exercising his own authority and enforcing his own

laws, unto the edification and establishment of his Kingdom.

Christ, as King, has given to his church officers, oracles and ordinances; and especially has he ordained therein his system of doctrine, government, discipline, and worship, all of which are either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary inference may be deduced therefrom; and to which things he commands that nothing be added, and that from them naught be taken away.

As opposed to Roman Catholicism, Reformed theology avers that the nature of the authority given by Christ to his church is strictly ministerial and declarative; it is not imperial, magisterial, or legislative. It is a spiritual and moral power, not physical power. Physical force belongs to the state in the punishment of crime (Romans 13:1-6); spiritual authority is used by the church in dealing with sin (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

The Duties of the Church

The Duty to Worship and Serve God

The Westminster Confession of Faith (21:1) teaches us that the primary obligation of man, as God's image bearer, is to worship and serve him as Creator and Sustainer:

The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is good, and doeth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might.

But, as Robert Reymond points out, “if the church is duty-bound to worship and serve God as its first obligation, it is equally true that the church (as indeed is true of all men) must worship as God himself directs.”¹⁶ Which is to say, that apart from biblical revelation, man could not know how to worship God. Again, the essential nature of the Word of God is stressed in the life of the church.

Public, corporate worship is a biblical mandate which is stressed in both the Old and New Testaments. Under the Old Covenant, Israelites gathered on various “holy days” for public worship in the tabernacle and temple (Exodus 23:14-17). They also held services within their synagogues and/or house churches (Psalm 74:8; Leviticus 23:3).

The New Testament stresses the importance of worship in such passages as Acts 2:42; 20:7-12; and Hebrews 10:24,25. Under the New Covenant this worship is to take place on the Lord’s Day (Revelation 1:10), i.e., the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:1,2). As stated by the Westminster divines, in “Touching Days and Places for Public Worship”: “There is no day commanded in Scripture to be kept holy under the gospel [NT] but the Lord’s Day, which is the Christian Sabbath.”

The Christian Sabbath, states the Confession (21:8), is “then kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs beforehand, do not only observe an holy rest, all the day, from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations, but also are taken up, the

16. Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 868.

whole time, in the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.”

And on the Lord’s Day, according to the Confession (21:5), along with prayer, the “ordinary religious worship of God,” is restricted to:

The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching, and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence; singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ.

In contradistinction to Roman Catholicism and other Protestant groups, Reformed churches have insisted on following the “regulative principle of worship.” That is, in public worship services on the Lord’s Day, God is only to be worshipped in a manner which he has commanded in his Word (Deuteronomy 12:1-11,32; John 4:24; Hebrews 8:5). That which God commands is proper and necessary in the worship services that which he has not commanded is forbidden. The Confession (21:1) says it this way:

The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to any imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.

This “regulative principle” is taught in Scripture in a number of passages. In John 4:24, for example, Christ teaches that worship is to be guided by his Spirit in accordance with his truth. Paul confirms this in Colossians 3:16, where he says that genuine worship must be accord-

ing to “the Word of Christ...with grace in your hearts.” Then in Leviticus 10:1-3 we read of God’s judgment on those who sought to worship him in accordance with their own imaginations and devices. The God of Scripture is very serious about the way he is to be worshipped.

In the Westminster Shorter Catechism we are told that the second of the Ten Commandments teaches the regulative principle. This commandment, says the Catechism (Q 50,51), “requireth the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire, all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath appointed in his Word...[and it] forbiddeth the worshipping of God by images, or any other way not appointed in his Word.”

The Duty to Utilize the Means of Grace

In 2 Peter 3:18 the church is enjoined “to grow by means of the grace and knowledge of your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” Reformed theologians generally refer to the outward means by which God grants spiritual growth to the Christian as the “means of grace.” And as taught in the Shorter Catechism (Q 88), there are three “means of grace”: “the word, sacraments, and prayer.”

Of these three, the Word is primary. Even though both the Word and sacraments have the same Author, the same central content (Christ), and require faith to spiritually benefit from them, nevertheless, the Word is essential for salvation while the sacraments are not. Too, as we have seen, the Word determines the right administration of the sacraments.

Further, prayer, which as the Shorter Catechism (Q 98) teaches, is “an

offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his [revealed] will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies,” to be effectual, must be in accordance with the Word. That is, as the Catechism (Q 99) goes on to say, the rule that God has given us for our direction in prayer is “the whole Word of God,” but especially “that form of prayer which Christ taught his disciples, commonly called the Lord’s prayer [Matthew 6:9-15].”

The church is said to be the “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). It has the duty to bear witness to the truth of Scripture as the primary means of grace. The church has been enjoined to disciple the nations (Matthew 28:19,20), by preaching and teaching the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). That is to say, God’s people are duty-bound to evangelize the lost and to grow the church (Luke 24:47; 2 Timothy 4:5).

As Professor Reymond insightfully states, the fact that the church has a duty to be ever committed to the study and the teaching of the Word as the primary means of grace, “also means that the church must reflect deeply on the truth of God’s Word and frame what it finds there in symbols and confessions in order to better engender in its members a clear conception of their faith and to convey to outsiders a definite understanding of its doctrines.”^{17}

The Duty to Discipline and Minister to the Saints

As we have already studied, biblical church discipline is one of the

17. Reymond, *Ibid.*, 878.

marks of the church. The church must never shrink from this duty. But the church is also responsible to minister to the needs of the members, i.e., to nurture and edify the saints. This duty is taught in passages such as Matthew 25:37-40; Acts 6:1-6; Romans 12:6,7; and Hebrews 10:24,25; 13:1-3. As summarized in the Westminster Confession (26:2), because the church exists as a “communion of saints,” “saints by profession are bound to maintain a holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offereth opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus.”

The Duty to Finance the Work of the Church

In order to carry out the work of the church and the advancement of Christ’s kingdom, the church has a duty to call on its members to tithe. The Bible speaks of the importance of both “tithes and offerings” (Malachi 3:8). The tithe is mandated in the New as well as in the Old Testament (Matthew 23:23; Leviticus 27:30-33; Numbers 18:21-32; Deuteronomy 14:22-29). Offerings may be given above and beyond the tithe (2 Corinthians 8,9). These gifts (particularly the tithe) are the primary means by which the church is financed. In both the Old and New Testaments God calls on his church to faithful and sacrificial giving, promising blessings on those who obey (Malachi 3:8-10; Proverbs 3:9,10). One cannot outgive God (2 Corinthians 9:6-11).

The Church-State Relationship

In the history of the church-state relationship, two major errors have developed: Papalism and Erastianism. The former teaches that the church (i.e., the pope) is to rule both the church and the state. The latter maintains that both institutions are under the headship of the civil magistrate.

In the teachings of Christ (Matthew 16:13-20; 22:15-22), Paul (1 Timothy 3:14-16; Romans 13:1-6), and Peter (1 Peter 2:4-10; 2:13-17), on the other hand, we learn that the church and the state are both God-ordained institutions, under the law of God. They are to be separate as to their function, but not as to their authority. The civil magistrate is a ministry of justice, obeying and enforcing God's law in the punishment of the lawbreaker for the protection of the lawkeeper. The church is a ministry of grace, obeying and enforcing the law of God in the preaching and teaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. God has given the state the power of the sword to enforce Christ's supremacy in civil matters. And God has given the church the power of the keys of the kingdom to enforce Christ's supremacy in spiritual and moral matters. Thus, God's law is to be supreme in the state as well as in the church. The church is not to rule over the state, nor vice-versa. But God's law is to rule over both.

The magistrate's responsibility is summarized in the Westminster Confession (23:1), where we read that God has absolute sovereignty over the state, and that he has given it certain functions: "God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, hath ordained civil magistrates to be under him over the people, for his own glory, and the public good; and to this end, hath armed them with the power of the

sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evil-doers.”

In a sermon on 1 Samuel 8:11-22, John Calvin said it this way:

Yet it is certain that all royal dominion is meant to be ministerial. Indeed, I must add that kings are to be servants and ministers of God. Therefore it behooves them to consider themselves his commissioned legates to the people, who are to administer his affairs faithfully and are to take care of the people. Even though the power of earthly princes be great in this world, still they must realize that they are ministers and servants of God and the people.

Yet, as the Confession (23:3) goes on to say, the state is not to enter into the affairs of the church: “The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word or sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven.” The church, as an institution is distinct from the institution of the state. Says the Confession (30:1), “The Lord Jesus, as king and head of his church, has therein appointed a government in the hand of the church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.”

It must be added here that the church has certain responsibilities with regard to the state, just as the state has certain responsibilities with regard to the church. The church has a prophetic duty toward the civil magistrate. It is required of the church that the state be taught its duties under the law of God (Romans 13:1-6). Further, when it strays from these duties the church must call the state to repentance (1 Kings 17:1; 18:17,18; Mark 6:14-18).

The state, on the other hand, is to protect the church, not only from

those who would injure it, but also from those who would hinder it from fulfilling the Great Commission (Isaiah 49:23). As properly taught in the Confession (23:3), “as nursing fathers, it is the duty of the civil magistrates to protect the church of our common Lord, without giving preference to any one denomination above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions, without violence or danger. And, as Jesus Christ hath appointed a regular government and discipline in his church, no law of any commonwealth should interfere with, let, or hinder, the due exercise thereof, among the voluntary members of any denomination of Christians, according to their own profession and belief. It is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the person and good name of all their people, in such an effectual manner as that no person be suffered, either upon pretense of religion or of infidelity, to offer any indignity, violence, abuse, or injury to any other person whatsoever: and to take order, that all religious and ecclesiastical assemblies be held without molestation or disturbance.”

The Government of the Church

The church is an organization, therefore, it needs a governmental structure. A church without a government is simply not a church. (This is why some theologians consider church government to be a fourth mark of a biblical church.) Paul speaks to the need of orderliness in 1 Corinthians 14:40: “Let all things be done decently and in order.”

Over the centuries there have been three basic forms of church government: hierarchical or episcopal, congregational or independent,

and presbyterian. All three correctly believe that Christ is the head of the church and that he has given his church his Word by which the authority for rule exists. All three claim that they have a biblical basis for their respective governments. Obviously, all of these cannot be correct; if one is true then the others must be false.

The hierarchical or episcopal form believes that the church is to be governed by the bishop (*episkopos*). This is the government adopted by the Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Anglican, and Methodist churches, with various degrees of authority resting with the bishop. Roman Catholicism has the most stringent form of hierarchy with the papacy. The argument for episcopacy is based on “apostolic succession.” That is, the bishops of today have the authority the apostles had in the first century (e.g., ordination of ministers or priests).

Matthew 28:18-20 and Acts 1:8 are used as support for apostolic succession: with Christ’s ascension, his authority was vested in the apostles and it is to be with them and their successors, i.e., the popes, who are supposedly the spiritual descendants of Peter, to the end of the age. Acts 15 is also cited as a proof text, with the claim that James, as moderator of the Jerusalem council, was an early bishop.

There are, however, weaknesses in these arguments. First, Christ never appointed or ordained any apostles beyond the first century (Matthew 10:1-4; Acts 9). Paul believed himself to be the final apostle (1 Corinthians 15:8), and taught against others claiming apostolicity (2 Corinthians 11:13). Likewise, throughout his ministry Paul taught that the church should be ruled by a parity and plurality of elders (Acts 14:23; 20:17,28; Titus 1:5,7; see below).

Too, there is a paucity of biblical evidence for a highly structured church system in the New Testament. In 3 John 9-10, a strong warning is pronounced against a dictatorial form of government. Historically, there was no distinguishing between New Testament bishops and elders until Ignatius did so in the early second century. Clearly, the hierarchical church is a post-biblical development.

It is noteworthy that the Reformers also held to a form of apostolic succession, but not as per Roman Catholicism. They viewed apostolic succession as solely related to the doctrine of the apostles. As studied, the attribute of apostolicity has to do with the teachings of the apostles as the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20).

Congregationalism, or independency, holds to church government by democratic vote. The church is run by congregational majority rule. Much is made here of the priesthood of believers (1 Peter 2:9), and the voting of the congregations in Acts 6:1-6; 14:23. There are, however, several problems endemic to this view.

First, although the congregation did vote in the above cited passages, they were voting for officers who would be their representative leaders. Second, the fact that the church is a “priesthood of believers” has nothing to do with the economic or administrative function of the various believers within the church. Ontological equality should not affect economic function. And third, this view comes into sharp conflict with the passages which teach rule by elder-representatives (e.g., Titus 1:5; 1 Timothy 5:17).

Parenthetically, a distinction needs to be made here between modern day congregationalism and the form of congregationalism taught in

the Savoy Declaration (1658) and the London Baptist Confession (1689). The framers of these Confessions held to a presbyterian form of individual church government without the necessity of a broader court system.

The final form of government is presbyterianism. In this system, the government rests with the elders (*presbuteroi*), who are to rule, not by democratic vote, but according to biblical law. It has a long history in the Bible. Moses and the leaders of the Old Testament church were all assisted in their governing of the nation by the “elders.” Examples of this are numerous: Exodus 3:16,18; 4:29; 17:5,6; 18:13-27; Leviticus 4:15; 9:1,2; Numbers 11:14-25; Deuteronomy 5:23; 22:15-17; Joshua 7:6; 8:33; Judges 21:16; 1 Kings 8:1-3; 1 Chronicles 21:16; Psalm 107:32; etc. This practice clearly continued into the New Testament era, as is noticeable in Luke 22:66 and Acts 22:5, where Jesus and Paul, respectively, are examined before the “presbytery” or “council” of elders.

Presbyterianism is the most biblical form of church government, in that it meets the foundational principles given in Scripture. This is why we can and should speak of the *jus divinum* (“divine right”) of presbyterianism.

First, as the Confession (30:1) teaches “the Lord Jesus [is] king and head of his church.” According to Scripture, Christ is the only head of the church (Ephesians 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Colossians 1:18). He is the source of the church’s life and direction. And it is Christ’s Word that is to be the rule of authority in the church (Matthew 16:17-19).

Second says the Confession (30:1), Christ, as the head of the church

“hath therein appointed a government, in the hand of church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.” The Word of God vests church leadership in the elders or bishops (these words are used interchangeably in the New Testament; see Titus 1:5,7; Acts 20:17,28). These men (not women) are to rule for the body in which they serve.

Third, Christ has directed that church officers, who have been gifted by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28), are to be elected by the popular vote of the congregations which they serve. In Acts 6:1-6, in order to satisfy a definite need in the church regarding the daily distribution of food to the needy, the apostles recommended the selection of seven men to serve as deacons. After the qualifications necessary for holding such office in the church were stated, the congregation chose the seven men whom they judged suitable. These seven were then presented to the apostles who ordained them as deacons.

In Acts 14:23 we read of Paul and Barnabas presiding over the election of elders. The literal reading of the verse states that the elders were “appointed by the stretching forth of hands,” i.e., by vote. Church leaders are not to be imposed on a congregation. Having been gifted by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28), they are elected to office by the congregation. It is important to note here that although church leaders are elected by democratic vote, they are elected to represent Christ the king and administer his Word in that congregation. This is ecclesiastical republicanism.

Who should be allowed to vote for church office in congregational meetings? The clear implication of the Bible regarding this issue is that baptized adult males in the congregation, not under church discipline, have the authority to vote for church officers. The humanistic,

egalitarian principle of universal suffrage is foreign to the Bible. Scripture is clear that women are to be subordinate to men in the teaching and governing of the church (1 Corinthians 14:34,35; 1 Timothy 2:8-14; 1 Corinthians 11:8). Voting for church officers is by its very nature an expression of the rule, authority, and government of the church. Women are therefore not to vote. Single women, who are still living with their fathers, are represented by the fathers (Numbers 30; 1 Corinthians 7:36-38). Single women who are either widowed or divorced and “heading up” a family are represented by the elected officers.

An additional word is apropos here. Even though the role or function of the women in the church is one of submission and subordination, Christian women are, ontologically speaking, every bit as equal and precious to God as are Christian men. They are co-heirs of the kingdom of God (Galatians 3:28).

Fourth, as alluded to above, the bishop is not “over” the elder any more than the elder is “over” the bishop; neither is the pastor-teacher, who is a teaching elder, “over” the ruling elders. There is a parity of office among all bishop-elders, whether they are teaching elders, i.e., ministers of the Word, or ruling elders (see the distinction made between these two in 1 Timothy 5:17). They are to exercise church government in unison, and on a parity (equivalence and equality) with each other. This parity is surely evident in 1 Peter 5:1-4, where the apostle Peter calls himself a fellow-elder with the other shepherds of God’s flock.

Fifth, there is to be a plurality of elders in each church, which is obvious from passages such as Acts 14:23; 20:17; and Philipians 1:1.

That is, each congregation is to elect more than one elder. This provides the “checks and balances” necessary to guard against a “one man show.” Parity and plurality go hand and hand together. John Murray writes: “The principle of parity is coordinate 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.”^{18}

Notice is made here that in the presbyterianism form of church government the problem of the one and many finds its solution. Simply stated, the issue of the one and many has to do with where authority rests. Is the one to be supreme in authority, or is it the many?

Episcopacy elevates the one (hierarchy) above the many; independent churches elevate the many (democracy) above the one. Presbyterianism finds its solution in the doctrine of the Trinity. God is one in one sense (essence), and many (three) in another sense (persons). Within the Godhead there is both parity and plurality. The Scriptures teach that this should also be true in church government. There is to be a parity and a plurality among the elders of Christ’s church. There is a balance of power with a structure of authority.

By way of summary, the church is governed by Christ through elders called by him, and elected by the congregation. It is not to be ruled by one man, as the pope or bishop (as in episcopal church government).

18. John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vols. I-IV (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976-1982), II:346.

Nor is it to be ruled by majority vote (as in independent or congregational church government). Christ's church is to be governed and served by representatives elected by the adult male members of the congregation, to represent and administer the rule of Jesus Christ in his Word (Hebrews 13:7,17). Christ's church is not a democracy. It is a Christocracy, governed by Christ through his representatives elected by the church. And there is a parity and plurality among these leaders.

Sixth, the *jus divinum* of presbyterianism calls for an appellate court system. As stated in the Confession (31:1): "For the better government, and further edification of the church, there ought to [must] be such assemblies as are commonly called synods or councils: and it belongs to the overseers [pastors or teaching elders] and other rulers [ruling elders] of the particular churches, by virtue of their office, and the power [authority] which Christ hath given them for edification and not for destruction, to appoint such assemblies, and to convene together in them, as often as they shall judge it expedient for the good of the church."

We have seen that each church is to be governed by its board of elders, frequently referred to as the "session." The session constitutes a local church court. But Scripture teaches that there is also a connectional-ism that exists between churches in the form of a broader church court system. The broader courts are, as cited in the Confession above, *ad hoc* "assemblies," where teaching and ruling elders "convene together in them, as often as they shall judge it expedient for the good of the church." Here again we have the one and the many harmonized. Every local congregation is a complete church (one). But there is also a connection between churches (many). There is a unity ("oneness") among the "many" churches.

The second level of the appellate courts system is called a “presbytery.” It consists of a group of teaching and ruling elders within a certain district, who represent the various local churches.¹⁹⁾ The presbytery is to act in a ministerial capacity, determining controversies of faith, matters of doctrine, and matters of conscience, which the local church cannot handle. The presbytery is to function as a help in promoting good government and in edification, but it is not to legislate. As taught by the Westminster Confession of Faith (31:3):

It belongs 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.

When we speak of the church operating in a ministerial, non-legislative capacity, what we mean is that all matters must be adjudicated based on biblical law. Ecclesiastical power is derived, not original. Christ alone is the lawgiver in his church (James 4:12). And the business of the church is “to set down rules and directions” which are consonant with the Word of God.

Then too, as taught in “The Form of Presbyterian Church Government of the Westminster Assembly,” the presbytery is to act in the capacity of training and testing elders to assure that they are qualified to serve

19. In most presbyterian churches, the teaching elders are members of presbytery, while churches that belong to a presbytery select a delegate of ruling elders to represent the church at presbytery meetings. Thus, teaching and ruling elders are not both at presbytery for the same reason and with identical functions.

in their office. Then it is to ordain them: “Ordination [which] is the solemn setting apart of a person to some public church office...is the act of presbytery.” This being the case, we are to understand that a man may not ordain himself to an office in the church, nor may another single individual ordain a man to office. Christ, through his church acting in presbyteries, trains, approves, calls, ordains, and installs men in office.

That presbyteries existed as part of the apostolic church is explicitly taught in 1 Timothy 4:14. Here we read that Timothy was ordained (undoubtedly after he had been trained and tested) by the “laying on of hands” (the symbolic setting apart of a man for office) by the elders in that particular presbytery. It is also implicitly taught in various other passages. For instance, as seen above, the church at Jerusalem is considered to be one church (Acts 2:47; 8:1; 12:5), even though there were obviously a number of local congregations. This is strongly indicative of a local presbytery.

Moreover, the church at Ephesus consisted of a large number of Christians with different backgrounds and languages (Acts 19:10,17-20; 1 Corinthians 16:8,9), who met in house churches (1 Corinthians 16:19). Yet, the churches at Ephesus are considered to be one church (Acts 20:17-37; Revelation 2:1), which (implicitly) would have been under the government of a local presbytery. In fact, in Acts 20:17 we read of the apostle Paul calling a presbytery meeting.

It is also noteworthy that in Acts 13:1-2 we have the record of the Antiochan presbytery involved in missions work. A later report was made by the missionaries to this same presbytery in Acts 14:27. And in Acts 11:19-30 we have the record of the presbytery at Antioch giv-

ing relief funds to “the elders” who constituted a sister presbytery in Jerusalem.

The third and broadest court within presbyterianism is the synod or general assembly. In Hebrews 12:22-24, for example, we read of the festive gathering of God’s people as “the general assembly and church of the first born ones.” Then in Revelation 4 a festive assembly is described where the twenty-four elders are representing the church as a whole. The synod or general assembly consists of teaching and ruling elders from the churches throughout Christendom. It is, thus, a broader court than the presbytery.

The biblical warrant for synods is also found in Acts 15. In this chapter the privilege of appeal to the assembly of elders and the power of the broader church to make decisions affecting the whole church is clearly taught. Barnabas and Paul had a dispute about the relationship between circumcision and justification (a doctrinal matter) with certain false teachers from Judea. The dispute originated in Antioch, but it was not settled there. The matter was referred to a broader church court (synod or general assembly) consisting of apostles and elders at Jerusalem. Acting jointly, these church representatives rendered a decision on the issue, a decision to which the church at Antioch and the churches of Syria and Cilicia yielded submission (see Acts 16:4).

It should be obvious that the Acts 15 passage is given to us in the New Testament as an example to follow. If all that was necessary was a divine mandate, it could have been rendered by one of the apostles. But the court proceedings have been inscripturated for us as an example of how church government is to function. Hence, any government without such a court system is unbiblical.

Note is made, however, that the decision of such courts should be followed only when it is biblical, as per Acts 15. In the Westminster Confession (31:3,4) we read that all decrees and determinations of broader courts “if consonant with the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission.” Further, we read that these decisions “are not to be made the rule of faith and practice, but to be used as an help to both.”

Since all courts, from time to time, can and do err in their decisions, no man or group of men can bind the conscience of a local church or church member. God’s Word alone is the only sure rule of faith and practice; it alone is to be followed with “implicit faith.” Hence, no court decision must ever be yielded to thoughtlessly. Rather, the Berean principle of Acts 17:11 is always to be followed.

It is also noteworthy that in the entirety of the Book of Acts, which covers a period of 30-33 years of church history, the Acts 15 general assembly is the only one noted. This is significant, because it has become far too prevalent in alleged presbyterian circles to have synod meetings on a very regular basis. Rather, it seems that in apostolic times these assemblies were more *ad hoc* than we find today. As taught in the Confession (31:1), the elders are “to appoint such assemblies, and to convene together in them, as often as they judge it expedient for the good of the church.”

In closing this section, there are two other forms of church government that should be mentioned: none (or minimal) and national. The former has been adopted by such organizations as the Quakers and Plymouth Brethren. These groups speak as if they have no form of government, but this is not really the case. Leaders do exist and disci-

pline is carried out where necessary. The latter form of government is found in the Anglican Church in England and the Lutheran Church in Germany. In this arrangement, the church is under the headship of the state. As seen above, this Erastian form of government is unbiblical.

Church Officers

As we have seen, for a church to operate biblically it must have officers, i.e., representative leaders. Says the Confession (30:1): “The Lord Jesus, as king and head of his church, hath therein appointed a government in the hand of church-officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.”

As taught by the Westminster divines, in their “Form of Presbyterial Church Government,” the New Testament speaks of three church offices: teaching elders (pastors and/or teachers), ruling elders (or governors), and deacons. Pastors (Ephesians 4:11) and teachers (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 5:17) are generally referred to as “teaching elders.” Their primary task is that of the ministry of the Word, along with the administration of the sacraments, and prayer in behalf of the church members. As stated by Calvin: “Among so many excellent gifts with which God has adorned mankind, it is a peculiar privilege, that he designs to consecrate men’s lips and tongues to his service, that his voice may be heard in them.”^{20}

The ruling elder or governor (Romans 12:8; 1 Corinthians 12:28), on the other hand, has the primary responsibility of ruling or governing

20. Calvin, *Institutes* IV:1:5.

the church along with the teaching elders (1 Peter 5:1-4). As Jesus says in John 21:15-17, church leaders are to both “feed my sheep” and “tend my sheep.”

The third New Testament office is that of deacon (1 Timothy 3:8-10,12,13). The Greek word for deacon (*diakonos*) means “servant.” The ministry of the diaconate is spoken of in Acts 6:1-6. Again, as averred by “The Form of Presbyterian Church Government,” it is a ministry of service: “To whose office it belongs not to preach the Word, or administer the sacraments, but to take special care in distributing to the necessities of the poor.” The deacon, then, is to be involved with the health and welfare aspect of church ministry.

In the early church there were other extraordinary offices: apostles, prophets, and evangelists (Ephesians 2:20; 4:11), who were given special revelatory gifts (prophecy, tongues, healing, etc.) The apostles, as Christ’s ambassadors, wrote (1 Corinthians 14:37) and spoke (2 Peter 3:1,2) the infallible Word of God. New Testament prophets also spoke under the influence of the Holy Spirit (Acts 21:10,11). Some evangelists were likewise given extraordinary gifts in the first century to confirm the gospel message (Acts 6:8-15; 8:5,6; 21:8). But with the close of the apostolic age and the canon of Scripture, these revelatory gifts ceased, and the extraordinary offices passed away (1 Corinthians 13:8-12; Hebrews 1:1). The three ordinary offices cited above, however, continue.

The qualification for church officers are given in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Here we find that the emphasis is on the character of the individuals. They are to be “above reproach.” They must be good family men whose reputation is strong, both inside and outside of the church.

All church officers are called on to be spiritual leaders, i.e., examples to the flock. Elders and deacons are to be learned in the Scriptures. But the elder is to be “able to teach” as well (1 Timothy 3:2). With this requirement, and the fact that elders, not deacons, are caretakers of the church (1 Peter 5:1-4), we see the main difference between the offices. As stated, elders are to be more involved in spiritual ministry and deacons in physical ministry. At the very least all elders, ruling as well as teaching, should be able to explain the Christian faith and practice to those under their care. Thus even though a ruling elder may not be called upon to proclaim God’s Word from the pulpit, he must nevertheless be capable of teaching those he would lead.

Note is also made that the church officers are to be held only by men, godly men to be sure, but men. Paul could hardly have made this more clear than he does in 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, 1 Corinthians 14:34, and 1 Timothy 2:12. The ordination of women to church office finds no support in the Bible. Professor Reymond’s comment here is apropos: “A church that would ordain a woman to the eldership is flying in the face of the consistent testimony of Scripture opposing such an action as well as thirty-five hundred years of biblical and church history.”^{21}

In 1 Timothy 3:11, in the midst of his teaching on church officers, the apostle Paul writes about certain women (*gunaikas*). Some maintain that this verse, along with Romans 16:1-2, where Phoebe is called a deaconess or helper, allows the church to ordain women deacons as officers within the church.

21. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 901n.

This understanding of the passage, however, cannot be the true one. If Paul were referring to women deacons in 1 Timothy 3, would he not have concluded his list of qualifications for men deacons prior to introducing a new office in verse 11? Rather, the apostle goes on in verses 12 and 13 to speak of further qualifications for the men.

As Calvin concluded, it is most likely that the women of 1 Timothy 3:11 are the wives of the church officers: “He [Paul] means the wives both of deacons and bishops [elders], for they must be aids to their husbands in their office; which cannot be, unless their behavior excel that of others.”^[22]

Furthermore, the word used to describe Phoebe in Romans 16:1-2 (*diakonos*), can just as easily read “servant” (as per the KJV and NIV versions). That there were deaconesses in the early church is practically unquestionable. But they served as an order of helpers, as per 1 Timothy 5:3-16, and did not hold church office. They performed such functions as visiting the sick and ministering to the poor and needy.^[23]

The Rite of Imposition of Hands

The laying on of hands in the Old Testament was a familiar method of ordination and installation into office throughout the entirety of Old Testament history.

In the New Testament we have recorded four kinds of “laying on of

22. Calvin, *Commentary* on 1 Timothy 3:11.

23. For a complete and thorough refutation of the ordination of women to church office, see Gordon Clark’s *The Pastoral Epistles*, Appendix A.

hands.” (1) By Christ himself to express an authoritative blessing (Matthew 19:15; Mark 10:16). (2) In the healing of diseases (Mark 16:18; Acts 28:8). (3) In conferring extraordinary, miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17; 19:6). (4) In solemnly setting apart men for church office, (without conveying miraculous gifts) (Acts 6:6; 13:3; 1 Timothy 4:14). Hebrews 6:2 belongs probably to (3) or (4).

The Old Testament Roots of the Laying on of Hands

The “hand” has a symbolic meaning in the Bible. It is a symbol of power or of action, so that to speak of the “hand” of the Lord is to speak of his power to bless or to curse (1 Kings 11:26; Exodus 9:33; Psalm 28:2; Genesis 48:13,14). In the laying on of the hands of the presbytery three truths are symbolized: (1). *The hands of presbytery should be considered as the hands of God.* Just as the firstborn of Israel belonged totally to the Lord, and had to be “redeemed” from life-long priestly service by the substitution of a Levite totally dedicated to the service of the Lord (Exodus 13:2, 11-13; Numbers 8:9-19), so the hands of the presbytery represent the hands of the Lord consecrating the ordained person to total service to the task and office to which the Lord has called him. (2). *The hands of the presbytery should also be considered as the hands of the church.* Just as the Levites laid hands on the sacrificial animals symbolizing the identifying of the entirety of the covenant people through the hands of their Levitical representatives with the sacrifice, so the laying on of hands sets forth our acceptance of the atonement by Christ as our salvation, and our total consecration, whatever our calling, to the Lord. The setting apart of the man ordained means symbolically the setting apart of all of God’s people in this symbolic firstborn or Levite to God’s total service. In much the same way that the leaders of Israel represented

Israel through the imposition of hands, so Paul in 1 Timothy 4:14 speaks of the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. Those who impose their hands upon the ordinand represent the people and commit the people to God's service through the one so chosen and called. (3). *Those upon whom hands are laid in ordination belong not to the members of the church but to the Lord of the church.* As God said in the Old Testament in Numbers 3:12, "the Levites shall be mine." Therefore, since the Levite was a substitute for the covenant people, the members of the church themselves belong not to themselves but to the Lord, and the ordination of officers with the laying on of hands is a ritual testimony to that fact.

"If we deny the Old Testament meaning of the laying on of hands, then we turn the clergy into a professional class which has no essential relationship to the people except to serve as need arises. If we accept the Old Testament meaning, then we have a body of believers who have a common life in Christ as their head, and the presbyters or bishops as their representatives, instructors, examples and leaders in the service of the king and the work of his household."^[24]

The Imposition of Hands in Ordination in the New Testament

In 1 Timothy 4:14 we read Paul's exhortation to Timothy, "Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery." There are four elements in this verse that we should consider: (1) The office to which Timothy was ordained was probably the office of evangelist, so as to become

24. R. J. Rushdoony, *Systematic Theology*, in two volumes, (Vallecito, California: Ross House Books, 1994), 719.

Paul's co-laborer, traveling from country to country and town to town preaching the gospel and planting churches. (2) Timothy was ordained with the laying on of hands by the presbytery, i.e., the elders of the church in their associative capacity. (3) Timothy had been the subject of prophecies before his ordination (1 Timothy 1:18). (4) A spiritual gift was bestowed upon Timothy or recognized as being in Timothy at his ordination, which gift he was exhorted not to neglect.

What was this spiritual gift, or this gracious gift, i.e. *charisma* in Greek, bestowed on Timothy at or through his ordination?^[25] The context suggests that it was a gift in connection with his office, designed to make him more effective in it, conferred as a token of God's favor. In 1 Timothy 4:13 Paul exhorts Timothy, "Give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine." Then in verse 14 he immediately adds, "Neglect not the gift that is in thee." The close connection of these two exhortations from Paul compels us to believe that the gracious gift was the gift of exhortation and teaching.

In 2 Timothy 1:6 Paul says to Timothy, "...stir up the gift of God, which is in thee by the putting on of my hands." This text contains

25. Vine's *Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* explains the use of the term this way: CHARISMA, a gift of grace, a gift involving grace (*charis*) on the part of God as the Donor, is used (a) of His free bestowments upon sinners, Rom. 5:15, 16; 6:23; 11:29; (b) of His endowments upon believers by the operation of the Holy Spirit in the churches, Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 1:7; 12:4, 9, 28, 30, 31; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6; 1 Pet. 4:10; (c) of that which is imparted through human instruction, Rom. 1:11; (d) of the natural gift of continence, consequent upon the grace of God as Creator, 1 Cor. 7:7; (e) of gracious deliverances granted in answer to the prayers of fellow-believers, 2 Cor. 1:11.¶

nothing that would lead us to believe that Paul is referring to Timothy's ordination. First Timothy 4:14 speaks of the laying on of the hand of the *presbytery*, while in 2 Timothy 1:6 Paul speaks of the laying on of *my hands*. It was the common practice of the apostles to lay hands upon believers to confer spiritual gifts upon them (Acts 8:17; 19:6). Furthermore, the *gift* that was to be stirred up or kindled afresh, i.e., excited to greater fervor and vigor, like the faith in his mother and grandmother, is something personal and moral (2 Timothy 1:5). "A man might fairly enough be called upon not to 'neglect' a gift necessary to the fulfillment of the duties of his office, and which is sure to improve by exercise; but he could scarcely be called upon 'to stir up.' That language would be more suitable in case of some private *charisma* (gift), connected with personal feeling or experience. Had the two gifts been conferred at the same time and place, it would be difficult for Timothy to distinguish between them, and to say which he was to 'stir up' and which he was 'not to neglect.' -- It is more natural to suppose that the apostle alludes to different transactions which took place at different times."^[26]⁶ In one instance, 2 Timothy 1:6 a personal gift of the Spirit is bestowed by God on Timothy through the instrumentality (*dia* is the Greek preposition) of Paul; and in the other, 1 Timothy 4:14, a gift relating to his office of evangelist was conferred by God concurrent with (*meta* is the Greek preposition) the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. "A presbytery had no reason to lay on hands except for the conferment of ecclesiastical office; but an apostle often laid hands on persons who were not appointed church officers, and upon whom nothing except a spiritual gift was bestowed."^[27]

26. Thomas Witherow, *The Form of the Christian Temple*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889), 132-133 (Hereafter *Witherow*).

This “special gift bestowed by the divine Spirit at the time of his ordination, removed every possible objection to the appointment of so young a man, and put in his possession a useful instrument which he must not allow to rust for lack of exercise. -- While the presbytery, with the laying on of hands, admitted him to office, the Holy Spirit conveyed the gift necessary to make him useful in the office to which he was appointed.”^{28}

What can we conclude from our 1 Timothy 1:13-14 regarding ordination as a means of grace? Ordination does not impart the Holy Spirit nor does it impart gracious gifts of the Holy Spirit *ex opere operato*, though it often pleases God to bestow such upon his servants at their ordination in order to equip them for effective service in the offices to which they are then being ordained. Furthermore, the imposition of the hands of the presbytery, being the ordained person’s official induction into office, gives him full ecclesiastical authority from Christ to discharge all the functions of that office. “Behind the ordination is the call of God which makes the true minister; but the public investment with office, and the right to discharge its duties, are conveyed in the divine ordinance of ordination. -- ‘Ordination,’ says [Robert] Baylie [Scots commissioner to the Westminster Assembly], ‘is an act of jurisdiction, it is an authoritative mission, and putting of a man into a spiritual office.’”^{29}

And as James Bannerman rightly says about the Presbyterian view of

27. *Witherow*, 134ff.

28. *Witherow*, 128-129.

29. *Witherow*, 141.

the imposition of hands: “...Presbyterians do not hold that there is any special promise annexed to the ordaining prayer, properly speaking, but they do hold that there are special promises and special grace connected with the office of the ministry (or the eldership), and with admission to the office of the ministry; and when the church, in accordance with the will of her divine head, proceeds to admit by ordination the individual to be set apart to its duties, and when all parties engage in the work in a right frame of mind, *there* and *then* the prayer of the church will bring down the special promise and the special grace appropriate to the occasion. If the ministry (or the eldership) be an office of Christ’s appointment, and if admission to the office by ordination be also of Christ’s appointment, then such ordinances will not be empty of the blessing. The act of ordination by the church, if it is a divine appointment, and if done in the right spirit, will not be without the presence and the peace of Christ, owning his own institution and blessing his own ordinance.”^{30}

Conclusion

In this monograph we have studied some of the basic tenets of the doctrine of the church. We have seen that the church is rooted and grounded in the Old Testament. The people of God are “one,” from the time of Adam.

There are four major attributes of the church: it is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Then there are three marks which define and

30. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 2 Vols., (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991 reprint of 1869 first edition), I:471ff.

constitute a true church of Christ: the true proclamation of the Word of God, the right administration of the sacraments, and the faithful exercise of church discipline. Without these vibrant marks, a church is not functioning as a biblical church.

We have also seen that the proper biblical government for the church is that of representative government, i.e., presbyterian. Teaching elders, ruling elders (or governors), and deacons are to serve as officers within the church, and they are to be men. The church of Christ is his bride (Ephesians 5:31,32; Revelation 19:7; 21:2,9,10), his body (Colossians 1:18), the one for whom he died (Ephesians 5:25). Thus, our understanding of the church will help us in our understanding of the one whom the church serves as her Savior and Lord: Jesus Christ.