

BIBLICAL CHURCH GOVERNMENT

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On the cover:

The first General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland. From the frontispiece of *Annals of the Disruption* by Thomas Brown (Edinburgh: MacNiven & Wallace, 1884).

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Introduction

TO MANY READERS, the subject of church government will not seem terribly exciting. Judging from the lack of contemporary literature on the topic, one might conclude that church polity is not very important. Yet, if the truth were known, many of the practical problems facing the church are the result of an abandonment of scriptural church polity.

The church is not a mere social club. The church is the kingdom of Christ, subject to his rule. In the Bible, the Lord has established an ecclesiastical government by which his people are to be ruled. Just as Christ has instituted civil government to ensure civil order, so he has established ecclesiastical government to preserve order in the church. A man is not free to dispense with the church's government anymore than he is at liberty to disregard the civil authorities.

Col. 1:13

1 Cor. 14:33

We do not contend that the divine order for church government extends to every detail. Obviously, the Lord did not mandate how many times the elders of the church must meet each month; nor did he prescribe any particular attire for them to wear while performing their official duties. Such incidentals are adapted to the needs and exigencies of the time and place, "according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed."¹ Nevertheless, the scriptures do provide an overall plan of government which the church must follow if

1. Westminster Confession of Faith, 1:6.

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she is to remain faithful to her Lord. Therefore, it is important to examine biblical principles of church polity.

This booklet will explore several features of church government which men are obligated to receive as scriptural institutions. These tenets are: (1.) scriptural church officers; (2.) church courts; (3.) confessional standards; and (4.) biblical church membership. These principles combine to form the distinctive nature of presbyterian polity.

Presbyterian government exists wherever these features are present. It should be noted that some churches which uphold presbyterian order are not presbyterian in name; this is the case with many churches coming out of the Continental Reformation. Nevertheless, these churches are still presbyterian because they adhere to biblical principles regarding church officers, ecclesiastical courts, confessional standards, and church membership.

The distinctive features of presbyterianism stand in opposition to several tendencies which presently threaten order in the church. One tendency is the concentration of power into the hands of a select number of ecclesiastical heavyweights. Both the hierarchy of Popery, and the Baptist inclination to exalt the pastor into a dictatorial role, flow from failure to adhere to the rule of elders who stand on a parity with one another.

Even among “conservative” Presbyterian denominations, there has been a steady erosion of the parity of the eldership. Judicial appeals are handled by standing judicial commissions. Most routine administrative business is conducted through denominational bureaucracies run by coordinators, committee-men, and staff members who are not even church officers.

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Thus, an ecclesiastical hierarchy exists which is effectively insulated from the review and control of church judicatories. This organizational structure bears more resemblance to prelacy than to scriptural, presbyterian principles.

An especially pernicious tendency in contemporary America is the growth of independency. A multitude of churches exist which militantly proclaim their autonomy. They arrogantly boast of no connection or common government with any other ecclesiastical assembly; it is as though they believe that schism is a virtue. An outgrowth of independency is the development of an entire industry of para-church agencies and self-appointed ministers.

Membership in the church is viewed as a matter of small significance: a person may attend regularly without ever joining a church anywhere or incurring any particular obligations. Members are free to adopt virtually any belief or lifestyle, according to their own individual preferences. Even open scandals and doctrinal aberration are allowed to continue without any corrective action from the church. In the last analysis, the situation in these so-called churches is nothing short of *ecclesiastical anarchy*. A proper resort to church courts and scriptural confessionalism could cure churches from these maladies of independency.

Over 150 years ago, Professor Samuel Miller (of Princeton Seminary) wrote:

It is plain, from the word of God, as well as from uniform experience, that the government of the Church is a matter of great importance; that the *form* as well as the *administration* of that government is more vitally connected with the peace,

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purity and edification of the church, than many Christians appear to believe; and, of consequence, that it is no small part of fidelity to our Master in heaven to “hold fast” the *form of ecclesiastical order*, as well as the “form of sound words” which he has delivered to the saints.²

2 Tim. 1:13

May men everywhere labor to restore biblical government to the church – in faithfulness to Christ, for the good of the church, and to the glory of God.

2. Samuel Miller, *An Essay, on the Warrant, Nature and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder, in the Presbyterian Church* (New York: Jonathan Leavitt; Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1832), p. 20. Cited hereafter as *The Ruling Elder*.

Government by Scriptural Church Officers

RULE BY ELDERS

THE NEW TESTAMENT speaks of the rulers in the church by the designations of *elders*, *overseers*, and *shepherds*. While these different terms are used, they all refer to the same office: that of the elder.¹

Presbyterianism takes its name from the Greek word *presbuteros*, which means *elder*. Presbyterians uphold government of the church by elders.

The people of God have been ruled by elders since early times recorded in the Old Testament. When sent by God to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, Moses was told to “gather the *elders* of Israel together, and say to them, “The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, appeared unto me”

Exodus 3:16

Deut. 21:19

Exodus 24:1

Num. 11:16

Lev. 4:15

Judges 8:14

At the time of Moses, elders were both rulers and covenantal representatives of the people. Elders were present in the time of the judges, the period of the kings, and the time

1. The terms in the Greek New Testament are *πρεσβύτερος* (elder), *ἐπίσκοπος* (overseer), and *ποιμήν* (shepherd). The words are used interchangeably in the Bible (see Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). Also, the term “governments” (1 Cor. 12:28, Authorized Version) has been taken as a reference to the elders of the church; the Greek word is *κυβερνήσεις*, which Tyndale and the Geneva Bible translate as “governors.”

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1 Sam. 16:4
2 Kings 19:2
Ezek. 8:1;
14:1; 20:1-2
Ezra 5:5, 9;
6:7-8, 14
Matt. 15:2
Mark 7:3
John 3:1;
7:26, 48
Mark 5:22
Luke 8:41
Cf. Acts
18:8, 17

of captivity. Elders provided leadership in the rebuilding of the temple after the return from captivity. Information on Jewish history during the intertestamental period also bears witness to the rule of elders in the synagogue.²

At the time of Christ's advent, references are found to the "elders," "rulers," and "rulers of the synagogue." Although the Jewish leadership was quite corrupt at this time, it is important to note that the Jews had not become so apostate as to allow the biblical office of elder to fall into disuse.

These scriptural references are important because they establish a continuity of government within the church in both the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament and the gospels provide crucial background information about the church government erected by the apostles. The apostles did not create something radically new; they built upon the foundation of previous biblical revelation. When the apostles described church officers, their hearers recognized much of the governmental framework which was found in the Old Testament. Therefore, a presbyterian rule (rule by elders) is not simply New Testament church government; it is *biblical* church government.

The New Testament contains abundant information on government by elders. The apostles deliver significant directives on church polity. Since God has established the rule of elders in the church, it is the duty of members to submit to these officers: "Obey them that have rule over you, and submit

Heb. 13:17

2. Consult Samuel Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, chapter 2.

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yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account.”

RULE BY QUALIFIED ELDERS

A primary emphasis of the New Testament is on the qualifications of elders. It is insufficient to have men merely appointed to assume the title of elders. They must be *qualified* to govern, as demonstrated in the scriptural criteria for officers. Even this point is nothing new, for the Old Testament required such rulers to be “wise men, and understanding, and known among your tribes,” “able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness.”

Deut. 1:13
Exodus 18:21

The apostle Paul delineates qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. It should be remembered that these requirements are the *essential* standards for men considered for this office. Far too often, however, this list is approached as though it contains only desirable qualities – or suggestions which may be loosely applied to potential elders. The implicit assumption is that men really cannot be expected to possess such demanding characteristics. Yet the text is clear: a man “*must* be” qualified. The same word is used when Jesus tells Nicodemus he “*must* be born again.” The matter is not optional.

1 Tim. 3:2
John 3:7

The qualifications for elders focus on three important aspects of a man’s life: his moral behavior, his knowledge of Christian doctrine, and his family life. An elder is continually in public view. The respect an officer receives often depends more on his example of good character than from anything else about him. It is quite easy to see why, above all, his moral

1 Tim. 3:2
Titus 1:6

character must be “blameless.” He will be required to wield godly influence for the church, and bring no reproach to the name of Christ.

1 Tim. 3:2
Titus 1:9

An elder must also possess a mastery of Christian doctrine. He must be “apt to teach,” as well as “to exhort and convince” those who contradict the truth of God. It is not enough for a man to be free from obvious error in his understanding of the faith. To serve as an elder, he must have (and be able to express) keen theological perceptions; he needs to be able to detect heresies and destroy them at their roots.

1 Tim. 3:5

Any man considered for the office of elder must have a stable family. “For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?” A man who fails to exercise godly dominion in his family is unfit for public trust as a ruling official in the church.³

1 Tim. 3:6

All of these basic qualifications for elders point to a corollary principle with respect to the officers of the church: the principle of *time*. The potential elder cannot be a novice. It takes *time* for a man to become mature in the faith. It takes *time* for a man to develop those qualities necessary to be an officer. It also takes *time* for those qualities to become manifest outwardly to the church.⁴ The congregation will have to scrutinize potential officer-bearers to evaluate their personal lives

3. This principle applies to civil officers as well. A man with a disorderly household is unfit to bear political rule.

4. The principle of time is especially neglected with modern ministerial training. Many young seminary graduates are thrust quickly into ecclesiastical offices. Similarly, recently-converted businessmen often are elevated rapidly to leadership roles in the church.

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and families. Only then will the church be able to recognize those men whom God has graced to be officers in the church. Congregations would do well to ponder these things. “Lay hands suddenly on no man.” *1 Tim. 5:22*

The scriptural mandates on the qualifications of the eldership require emphasis because they are frequently ignored in the church. An analogy to civil government may clarify the issue. In the civil government, men are not allowed to serve in an office unless they meet the prerequisites for that office. The qualifications for civil offices may be listed in the constitution of the nation (or state). For example, one qualification given for the President of the United States is that the man must be at least 35 years old. The architects of the constitution included this requirement to deter the hasty induction of political novices to an important office. No exceptions are made. No man may serve in the office unless he first fulfills this requirement.

In civil government, it is easy to detect the importance of qualifications for officers. Yet, for some reason, people balk at the idea of binding requirements in church government. It is as though the church’s business is inferior to the role of the civil government. And it is as if the civil government has a more authoritative constitution than the one given by Christ (in the Bible) to the church.

RULE BY A PLURALITY OF ELDERS

An important feature of presbyterian government is the rule by a *plurality* of elders. The apostles ordained “elders in every church” to carry out the normal government of the churches. *Acts 14:23;*
Cf. Titus 1:5

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This principle is largely ignored in many congregations today. Frequently churches are run at the whim of the pastor, who becomes, in effect, a religious dictator. In other places, a church may decide crucial issues by a congregational vote, in which each person has an equal share in the rule.⁵ At root, these systems do not possess a biblical framework.

The Bible places the government of a congregation into the hands of a group of elders who rule in a joint capacity. Since the elders rule collectively, no single individual makes the binding decisions of a church.⁶

From a practical standpoint, the benefits of this plurality of rule are quite apparent. Instead of concentrating power into the hands of a single individual, authority is vested in a number of men; this diffusion of power provides a greater safeguard against abuses of authority. A division of power has often been regarded as practical wisdom in civil government. It provides “checks and balances” in the system to prevent the rise of a dictator.

5. In name, congregational churches are not as prominent as they once were. Nevertheless, many church members hold the erroneous notion that the church should operate as a spiritual democracy. There is no surer way to foster rivalries, factions, and chaos than to make the general membership the deliberative body for decisions and arbitration.

6. Of course, the congregation does have a role in the selection of office-bearers. In many churches, a vote is taken before men are recognized as elders in the church. After the elders are placed into office, they are not to be viewed as ecclesiastical representatives serving the desires of their congregational constituents. Rather, they are to rule according to God’s law, not the impulses which may pass through the congregation. The proper sense in which the elders are understood as representatives is that they stand before God as the *covenantal representatives* of the people.

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Churches frequently abandon such conventional wisdom and allow great authority to be concentrated in the hands of a single dynamic individual. The error lies in a failure to realize that even godly men still need bridles to guard against their sinful inclinations. Some churches learn this lesson only after suffering at the hands of one of these dynamic despots.

As an added practical consideration, the plurality of elders makes sense when one considers the enormity of the tasks related to ecclesiastical rule. The spiritual oversight of an entire congregation is too much for only one man: his physical stamina, mental capacity, and time are limited. A multitude of problems arise which are too intricate for a single individual to handle. Additionally, there will be a diversity of duties to be cared for in any congregation. Some men will be more gifted with public speech, others in private exhortation, and some in handling the daily chores of administrative duties. The multifaceted needs in the church call for a diverse group of men. Each man utilizes his particular gifts, and the combined efforts minister to the corporate needs of the congregation.

The elders are themselves on a parity with one another. Historically, within presbyterianism, distinctions have often been drawn between ruling elders and teaching elders (pastors). Even so, there is no scriptural basis for exalting one man as a dictator over other elders in the government of the church. Neither is there any basis for treating the pastor as a mere hired hand who must unquestioningly serve at the arbitrary bidding of other elders. Although the elders of a church may divide the labor, according to their various gifts, each elder is still entitled to deliberate and vote in the church courts in

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which he serves. This point will be more fully developed in the ensuing discussion on church courts.

GOVERNMENT WITH DEACONS

Before moving from this discussion of church officers, a few words need to be said about the scriptural office of the deacon. Although there are indications of similar officers in the Jewish synagogue system, the initial New Testament appointment of deacons is found in Acts 6:1-6. This passage points to the nature and duties of the office.

A problem had arisen over the needs of widows in the Christian church. It was not thought proper for the apostles to be distracted from their primary duties in order to wait tables on a daily basis. Therefore, a special class of officers was ordained for the task of ministering to the necessities of the impoverished widows.

Acts 6:3

As with the eldership, not just anyone is fit for the office of deacon. The deacons must be “men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom.” Later, Paul elaborates on the meaning of the prerequisites by providing a more detailed list of qualifications for the diaconate in 1 Tim. 3:8-13. The primary focus is on honesty and family life.

1 Tim. 3:9

While the standards for the deacon are high, it will be noticed that they are not identical to those for the elder. The deacon must hold “the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience,” but his mastery of doctrine is not necessarily as extensive as the elder, who “by sound doctrine” must be able “to exhort and to convince the gainsayers.” This difference points to a basic distinction between elders and deacons.

Titus 1:9

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To the elder is given the task to *rule*, which includes the shepherding duties of oversight and teaching. Deacons are not rulers. They are a subordinate class of officers who serve under the direction of the elders.⁷ Deacons assist the elders, especially by relieving them of distractions in the temporal affairs of the church.

There is much confusion over the diaconate in modern Christianity. In Baptist circles, deacons are often the ruling body of the church, with no elders at all (unless one counts the pastor as an elder). The pastor may be subject to the whim of the Board of Deacons, which can dismiss him at a moment's notice. Or, the pastor may assume a dictatorial role, in which case the deacons have little purpose (except that they make good ushers).

The confusion respecting the office of deacon is not limited to Baptists. Presbyterians often display little conception of the nature of the deacon's office. Consequently, the diaconate may degenerate into a janitorial service for the local congregation. Although the deacons are then serving under the direction of the elders, they are hardly fulfilling the noble design of their office.

Briefly, what should the role of deacons be? They are ministers of mercy to destitute members of the congregation. They visit the afflicted, and disburse funds for relief of the needy.

Rom. 12:8

7. When the deacons are ordained in Acts 6, the apostles stand in their role as elders. Cf. 1 Pet. 1:1 and 5:1, where Peter refers to his position as both an apostle and elder.

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Princeton Professor Samuel Miller once asserted: “It is a great error to suppose that deacons cannot be appropriately and profitably employed in various other ways besides ministering to the poor in the church. They might, with great propriety be made the managers of all the money tables, or fiscal concerns of each congregation”⁸

Of course, the deacons do not act independently of the elders in this regard. But if the elders are relieved of many time-consuming tasks related to the pecuniary affairs of the church, how much more time can they spend in the shepherding duties that more strictly belong to their office?

This principle might also be applied to the higher courts of the church. James Henley Thornwell suggested that deacons might be employed to manage monetary matters in the service of the presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly of the church. In that capacity, deacons could collect and disburse funds, under the direction of the courts, to care for various missionary activities under the jurisdiction of these higher courts.⁹

DOCTORS, OR TEACHERS

We have spoken of two kinds of elders, commonly called ruling elders and teaching elders. Historically, Reformed churches have also acknowledged a third kind of elder, known as the *doctor*, or *teacher*. The doctor is a “minister of the word, as well as the pastor,” but he might not have the pastoral

Cf. 1 Cor.
12:28-29
Eph. 4:11

8. *The Ruling Elder*, Chapter 10, p. 237.

9. *Collected Writings*, Vol. 4, pp. 155, 201.

charge over a particular congregation; rather, he excels more “in exposition of scripture, in teaching sound doctrine, and in convincing gainsayers, than he does in application.” As a theologian and apologist, the doctor “is of most excellent use in schools and universities; as of old in the schools of the prophets.”¹⁰

The doctor is another example of division of labor within the eldership. As a teacher in the church, the doctor is answerable to the authority of the church courts, which set the boundaries of his calling. Within the courts of the church he is on a parity with other elders, thereby preserving the church from any hints of hierarchy. The doctor should not be confused with the modern “teachers” who assume an independent ministry outside the courts of the church, or serve

10. “The Form of Presbyterial Church Government” adopted by the Westminster Assembly, published in *The Confession of Faith; the Larger and Shorter Catechisms*, etc. (Inverness: Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1976), pp. 401-02. When ratifying this document, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland issued a qualification. While recognizing the office of the doctor or teacher, the Scots reserved for future discussion the power of the doctor to administer the sacraments (p. 393).

Readers will also find a section on “Teachers and Doctors” in the *Form of Prayers and Ministration of the Sacraments Used in the English Congregation at Geneva* (1556), in Knox’s *Works*, Vol. 4, p. 177. The reference to doctors in the Genevan Book is remarkable, since the congregation was in exile at the time, and unable to establish schools where such teachers could serve. Nevertheless, in the Genevan Book, the doctor is linked to the order of the schools, “wherein youth may be trained in the knowledge and fear of God, that in their ripe age they may prove worthy members of our Lord Jesus Christ, whether it be in civil policy, or to serve in the spiritual ministry, or else to live in godly reverence and subjection.”

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as instructors in institutions which are insulated from proper ecclesiastical authority.

The genuine office of the doctor has often fallen into disuse. While the employment of special teachers is desirable in fully organized churches, the presence of doctors is not essential for the ordinary government of the local church. Moreover, the higher courts of the church may function fully without them, when the resources of the congregations are insufficient to sustain ministers of this sort.

EXTRAORDINARY CHURCH OFFICERS

We have considered the ordinary officers in the church. A brief statement should be made regarding extraordinary and temporary officers who have been in the church.

Deut. 18:15-22 During the Old Testament era, the Lord raised up prophets in the church.¹¹ These men sometimes revealed previously hidden mysteries and foretold the future. This function set them apart from the ordinary officers and teachers in the church, the priests. Nevertheless, the regular labor of the prophets was to summon the people to obey the word of God, and therefore they also fulfilled an ordinary task as messengers and preachers.

The prophetic office fell into abeyance for about 400 years, in the period between Malachi and John the baptizer. The prophetic office resumed with the ministry of John, who prepared the way for Jesus, the consummate Prophet. As the scripture

11. The central passage regarding the prophetic office is Deuteronomy 18:15-22.

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says, God “at sundry times and in diverse manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets.” Now, “in these last days,” he has “spoken unto us by his Son.” *Heb. 1:1-2*

The Lord Jesus commissioned certain men from among his disciples to the special office of apostle, in order to spread the gospel throughout the world and to complete the foundation of the church. The apostles were aided in their tasks by prophets and special assistants, some of whom wrote books of the New Testament. These apostolic assistants – such as Mark, Luke, Timothy and Barnabas – seem to be the persons referred to as *evangelists* in the New Testament epistles. *Acts 21:8*
2 Tim. 4:5
Eph. 4:11

Thus was the church “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone.” Once this foundation was completed, the temporary officers were no longer necessary in the church. Therefore, since the apostles have passed from the scene, the church must be governed by the precepts of the written word alone, under the administration of the ordinary officers of the church – the elders and deacons. *Eph. 2:20*

SUMMARY

To sum up this chapter: it has been shown that God has established a government for the church through her officers. Specifically, there are two ordinary offices: elder and deacon. The elders rule over the church, discharging a number of shepherding duties for the maintenance and edification of the flock. The deacons share in the administration of the church as a subordinate class of officers, subject to the direction of

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the elders. Primarily, deacons minister to the needy members of the congregation, while relieving the elders of certain otherwise distracting matters.

Government by Church Courts

IN THE previous chapter, general assertions are made concerning church government by elders. But more precisely, how do these officers function? This inquiry is answered by the role of elders within the courts of the church. Generally speaking, presbyterian government is rule by elders; but more specifically, it is government by the courts of the church. Church courts are composed of elders, sitting in their official capacity, who judge appropriate matters brought to them for resolution.

Some of the ordinary activities of elders include duties which they may fulfill as individuals. They are to provide day-to-day spiritual nurture for their people: giving encouragement or reproof where needed, visiting the afflicted, and providing positive leadership as shining examples of Christian character. Other functions are handled by elders when they are assembled in a joint capacity.

The corporate duties of the eldership include watching over the doctrine of the church, making certain their congregations are provided with sound gospel preaching, and guarding against the intrusion of false teachers. The elders must ensure that the sacraments are administered lawfully; and they handle cases of church discipline which fall under their jurisdiction.

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THE LOCAL CHURCH COURT

The elders of a single congregation compose a church court which rules over that congregation. This court is frequently called the *session*. The session handles matters relative to its local church.¹ For instance, the elders of a local congregation may be required to judge the case of a member accused of immorality. Or, they may be asked to resolve a serious dispute between two members of the congregation who cannot reconcile their differences. In other words, the elders function in a *judicial* capacity.

In most cases, prior to bringing a matter before the elders, other biblical prescriptions must first be followed. If a dispute erupts between two persons, the party who feels wronged should initially confront the other person privately. Proper steps for resolving a conflict are expressly given in Matthew 18:15-16. If these steps are followed, and the situation remains unresolved, then the appropriate recourse is to “tell it unto the church.” This last step is accomplished by bringing the matter before the elders, who comprise the governing body of the church.

Suppose a member of the local congregation accuses another member of defrauding him in a business transaction. What should be done? Often, the problem remains unresolved (and sin is not dealt with), or one party sues the other in a civil court. The apostle Paul describes such a scene in 1 Corinthians 6. He asks, “Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you?

1. In churches which developed out of the Continental Reformation, the court of the local church is called the *consistory*.

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no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren?" If a congregation is governed biblically, it will have elders qualified to judge matters with wisdom and justice.

In rendering a decision, the elders must proceed cautiously, with a high regard for biblical principles of inquiry. They must investigate diligently and get both sides of a story. In a dispute between two persons the elders will seek to achieve a reconciliation between the opposing parties.

*Deut. 19:15-18;
Prov. 18:17*

At times, the elders may find it necessary to pronounce judgment against a person for immoral practices or heretical doctrine. In cases where the individual remains unrepentant, the resulting sentence may be excommunication.

*Matt. 18:17-18
1 Cor. 5:11-13*

HIGHER CHURCH COURTS

Sometimes problems arise which touch more than a single congregation. Presbyterianism provides an affirmative response to these problems through a system of rising church courts. There are many matters which cannot be settled adequately through the action of a single church; widespread doctrinal controversy is one of these matters. A doctrinal dispute formed the occasion of a biblical example that illustrates how presbyterianism functions in such a case.

In Acts 15, we are informed that certain men came to Antioch and taught, "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved." A dispute resulted, and the church at Antioch realized that this was an issue of more than passing interest to a single congregation. An assembly convened in Jerusalem, where "the apostles and elders came together for to consider this matter." The conflict was

Acts 15:1

Acts 15:6

Acts 16:4

discussed, resolved, and authoritative “decrees” were issued by the council.

This event is quite important because it shows the necessity of a wider court composed of elders from more than a single congregation. The higher court above the session is usually called a *presbytery*.²

Another important aspect of the Jerusalem council is that, although the apostles were present, they did not govern apart from the other elders of the church. Had the apostles chosen to issue an apostolic pronouncement, who would doubt the matter to be settled? Yet, even the apostles submitted to the calling of this church court, as if to demonstrate the transition between the apostolic era and the normative government of the church.

A third feature of the court’s action comes from the actual decision given by the apostles and elders. The “decrees” formulated in Jerusalem constitute a doctrinal standard for the churches at large. This doctrinal formulation becomes a visible expression of unity for the churches, and it possesses governing authority in the congregations. More will be said about this point in the next chapter.

Now, think back for a moment to the earlier example of the dispute between two church members, when one man accuses another of defrauding him in business. If they belong to the same congregation, their dispute may be adjudicated by the local elders – the session of that local church. But suppose the men are from different congregations. What then?

2. In some Reformed churches, this higher court may be called the *classis*.

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Disputes between members of different congregations are not uncommon. If the two churches are independent, there is no connection between them, and no stated method of resolution. Often problems like this are allowed to go unresolved. The question raised by this example is merely an extension of Paul's query in 1 Corinthians 6:5. In this case, the question might be phrased, "Is there no one able to judge between *these* brethren?" Presbyterians can answer the question affirmatively through its system of courts.

In a presbyterian system, the churches recognize they are bound together under a common government. Therefore, a wronged member of one church may bring his complaint respecting another individual to the session of the accused brother. Because the two men are under a common ecclesiastical government, the session must listen to the grievance and seek a scriptural resolution.

If the local session is unable to handle the case in a satisfactory manner, it may be referred to a higher court. This referral may occur at the request of a session, or on the basis of an appeal by one of the parties in a case.

As in all systems run by fallible men, mistakes will sometimes be made. In an independent church, a person who is maligned on the local level has no place to appeal for ecclesiastical justice. But in a presbyterian system, an appeals process exists to provide greater insurance for a just resolution.

Other cases may arise which are impossible to resolve at a local level, as when a problem occurs between two congregations. Or suppose a dispute occurs among the elders in a church which has only three elders. In such cases, the

presbytery offers a regular and orderly means of holding a fair trial.

The foregoing examples point to another very important principle of presbyterian polity. When the courts of the church convene, they function *judicially*. They are *courts*; they are *not* ecclesiastical congresses assembled to enact churchly legislation. Their function is to adjudicate matters based upon biblical law. As judges, the elders are not free to decide cases according to personal whim or the feelings of a moment. Rather, the elders must render judgment according to the principles of God's word. This is precisely what the apostles and elders did in Acts 15. Based upon God's written word in Amos 9:11-12 (cited in Acts 15:16-17), the heretical doctrine of the Judaizers is repudiated. The decrees of the assembly are derived from the scriptures.³

Amos 9:11-12
Acts 15:16-17

Unfortunately, the judicial focus of the church courts has been progressively lost in this century, even among the more "conservative" Presbyterian denominations. When the courts convene, they handle very little judicial business. For

3. "Of this body the church, Christ alone, as before intimated, is the Head. He only has a right to give laws to his church, or to institute rights and ordinances for her observance. His will is the supreme guide of his professing people; his word their code of laws; and his glory their ultimate end. The authority of church officers is not original, but subordinate and delegated: that is, as they are his servants, and act under his commission, and in his name, they have power only to declare what the scriptures reveal as his will, and to pronounce sentence accordingly. If they attempt to establish any other terms of communion than those which his word warrants; or to undertake to exercise authority in a manner which he has not authorized, they incur guilt, and have no right to exact obedience...."

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example, the general assemblies tend to resemble annual business conferences or political conventions. Attendees are subjected to corrupt worship, wranglings over parliamentary procedure, and bureaucratic reports and public relations ploys by various denominational committees. Members of the assembly may vote on non-binding resolutions pertaining to current political and social issues, but legitimate judicial business is farmed out to obscure committees. Such ecclesiastical assemblies utterly fail to fulfill the God-given role of church courts “ministerially to determine controversies ... to receive complaints of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same.”⁴

MINISTERIAL EXAMINATIONS

One other item within the jurisdiction of the church courts is the examination of pastors and other officers in the church.

“And, as all the power of the church is derived, not from the civil government, but from Christ, the almighty King of Zion; and as it is purely spiritual in its nature and sanctions; so the power of the church officers is merely ministerial. They are, strictly, servants, who are to be governed, in all things, by the pleasure of their employer. They have only authority to announce what the Master has said, and to decide agreeably to that will which he has made known in his word. Like ambassadors at a foreign court, they cannot go one jot or tittle beyond their own instructions. Of course, they have no right to set up a law of their own. The Bible is the great statute-book of the body of which we speak; the only infallible rule of faith and practice. And nothing can be rightfully inculcated on the members of the church, as truth, or demanded of them, as duty, but that which is found in that great charter of the privileges as well as the obligations of Christians.” Samuel Miller, *The Ruling Elder*, pp. 17, 25.

4. Westminster Confession of Faith, 31:3.

1 Tim. 4:14
Acts 20:29-30

The courts judge the credentials of men who seek to be leaders in the church. For example, the apostle Paul speaks with approval of Timothy’s ministerial gift, which was made manifest by “the laying on of the hands of the presbytery.” Conversely, Paul warns the elders of “savage wolves” who seek to pervert things in the church; the ecclesiastical courts are designed to protect the church against such intruders.

Acts 13:3-4

The need for ministerial examinations is crucial. Frequently, men assume to themselves spiritual titles – such as “evangelist” and “pastor” – or set up their own independent “ministries.” They commence these roles without answering to any authority within the church, adopting a presumptuous approach which is contrary to the biblical pattern for ministry. Even the apostle Paul submitted to the governmental authority of the church when, prior to his missionary journeys, he was set apart to the task *by the church*, through the laying on of hands. When Paul was “sent forth” by the Holy Spirit, he was also “sent” by the church. Paul’s example illustrates that even the supernatural leading of the Spirit works in harmony with the operations of the church.⁵

Ministerial trials are exceedingly important. They are a safeguard to protect congregations from false shepherds. The

5. One of the curses of modern American religion is the proliferation of independent ministries, evangelistic associations, campus organizations, autonomous mission boards, independent seminaries, and other para-church organizations. Organizations are audaciously founded without having to answer to any authority within the church. Just like individuals, religious organizations have no special exemption from submitting to proper authority in the church.

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Scottish Reformer John Knox provides an appropriate warning in this regard:

Satan has sent forth his messengers, almost in all quarters, to disperse and sow abroad these his pestilent opinions; and therefore in the bowels of Christ Jesus, I exhort you to try the spirits of such as shall come unto you. Suffer no man without trial and examination to take upon him the office of a preacher, neither to travel amongst the simple sheep of Christ Jesus, assembling them in privy conventions. For if every man shall enter at his own appetite in the vineyard of the Lord, without just trial of his life, conversation, doctrine, and condition – as some, more to serve their own bellies than the Lord Jesus, will offer their labors – so no doubt shall Satan have his other supporters by whom he purposes to destroy the very plantation of our heavenly Father.⁶

A few concluding remarks about church courts are in order. In many Presbyterian denominations, there are higher courts above the presbytery. These higher courts may go by the name of the *synod* or the *General Assembly*. Where they do exist, these higher courts should function mainly as courts of appeal to remedy grievances rising up from the presbyteries. The higher courts should not be viewed as sanctified bureaucracies which may impose arbitrary restrictions upon the presbyteries. Like the lower courts, the higher courts exist to adjudicate matters brought before them. They have no legitimate legislative or bureaucratic power. When the higher courts function properly

6. "A Letter to His Brethren in Scotland," in *The Works of John Knox* (edited by David Laing; Edinburgh: James Thin, 1895), Vol. 4, pp. 271-72 (spelling modernized).

(to handle appeals), the bulk of the church's business is handled by the lower courts.

In the United States, the presbyteries (or higher courts) are frequently composed of elders from churches in a given state or region. The concept of the *regional church* seems to be reflected in the apostle Paul's salutation to "the churches of Galatia." Galatia was a particular territory in the Roman Empire. In his epistle to the Galatians, Paul addresses a large number of separate congregations and gives directives common to them all. Based upon a similar line of thinking, Presbyterian denominations usually organize according to geographical regions which allow for government and cooperation among churches sharing many common interests.

Gal. 1:2

Cf. Acts 16:6

1 Pet. 1:1

In the days of Colonial America, when travel was difficult, and in places where Presbyterian churches were numerous, a presbytery might cover a smaller area – such as the Presbytery of Philadelphia. In the present day, however it is not unusual to find a presbytery constructed from a larger geographical area. Hence, there may be a Presbytery of Texas, or a Presbytery of the Northwest.

During the Scottish Reformation, many responsibilities, of necessity, devolved upon the higher courts of the church. The Church of Scotland adopted a book of polity, subsequently known as *The First Book of Discipline*. The book did not mandate a centralized system of polity; it envisioned numerous activities at the local level. Yet, because many congregations were without regular pastors and sessions, provisions had to be made for the spiritual needs of the people. Itinerate preachers (called superintendents), joint sessions, and regional oversight

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of churches became commonplace. These extraordinary measures were not permanent; in ordinary seasons, most of these functions reverted to local judicatories.

During this formative period of Scottish presbyterianism, the General Assembly regularly convened twice a year. The circumstances produced a somewhat centralized structure which, although suited to the Scottish Reformation, may not be appropriate in other nations at all times. Scotland is geographically a small country. It would be a mistake, therefore, to conclude that all the particulars of the Scottish model can be (or should be) exported to other nations, when the circumstances and geography are dissimilar.

This analysis does not relegate the subject of church government to the realm of relativism. There are many overarching principles of church polity which have been established by divine law. These precepts must be pursued in all times and in all places. In a fully organized church, the congregation will possess a solid group of church officers (deacons, elders, ministers of the word); it will be linked to other congregations in a graded system of ecclesiastical courts, where justice is the rule, and ministerial candidates are tested as to their qualifications for office; further, the sacraments and church discipline will be rightly administered. These are the central features of biblical polity. Some of the details may vary from one denomination to another. Nevertheless, wherever the essentials of the system are maintained, the government is still presbyterian.

Government with Confessional Standards

SO FAR, this essay has explored two of the essential features of presbyterian polity: government by elders, and government by church courts. This chapter describes the role of confessional standards in the government of the church.

We noted earlier that the church may issue doctrinal statements as a product of its deliberations. This observation points to another scriptural principle: the church is governed by confessional standards. Briefly, a confessional standard may be defined as a public statement of the beliefs held by a church. Such a statement may contain the truth in positive form, or it may refute heretical notions which are being denied.

As shown, the decrees of the Jerusalem council had a binding governmental function in the church. The decrees denied the false teaching of the Judaizers, and also gave some brief instructions governing the practice of members of the church.

*Acts 15:24;
15:28-29*

Elsewhere in the Bible, doctrinal tests are provided. For example, the apostle John writes: “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth

1 John 4:1-3

not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now is it in the world.”

Throughout history, as heresies became more numerous and more complex, the confessional statements of the church became more elaborate. The doctrinal statements provided more details in order to deal effectively with the subtle crafts of heretics.

An example from the fourth century illustrates the point well. The doctrines of Arianism swept throughout the Christian church and produced a large number of heretics who denied the deity of Jesus.¹ The Arians did not openly deny the teaching of scripture. They affirmed their belief in Jesus as the “Son of God,” and also used other biblical titles given to the Saviour. The heretics circumvented the scriptural teaching, however, by attaching their own special meanings to the biblical terminology. In order to flush out these heretics, a church council, which met at Nicea, formulated a confession of faith in 325 A.D., summarizing the true meaning of the biblical texts. The confession is known as the Nicene Creed, and it was used to exclude Arians from the church.

Many other creeds and confessions have been drawn up over the centuries. Some have even been written by the heretics themselves. The point at issue here is not which creeds

1. The Arians were named after Arius, a fourth-century presbyter from Alexandria. He denied the eternity of Jesus Christ, and his teachings were condemned by the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. The chief opponent of Arianism was Athanasius, who vigorously defended the doctrine of Christ's deity.

are the best expression of Christian doctrine, but to illustrate that confessionalism is consistent with the scriptural government of the church.

Creeds are also an outgrowth of the teaching ministry of the church. It is not as though a creed usurps the role of the Bible. The Bible is the only infallible rule of faith and practice. But since many sects claim to uphold the authority of the Bible, a creed is extremely valuable because it reveals how a particular church understands the scriptures.

Creeds provide a means for the church to state the truth in a summary public form. In this respect, confessions help fulfill the church's role as a witness to the world by proclaiming the truths of the gospel.

In the present era of religious decline, creeds are especially valuable to the testimony of any denomination. By looking at the creed of a church, men may determine the nature of its doctrine and what principles (if any) govern its members. Presbyterian denominations have generally adopted the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, or the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism.

The confessional standards are *objective* standards. By this characteristic, they point to the objective nature of God's revelation in the Bible. Creeds provide a defense against the shifting fads of theological liberalism. They also protect the church from mystical desires to exchange the objective authority of scripture for the subjective authority of inward impulses. Far too often, people mistakenly regard their inward feelings as the leading of the Spirit, even when their feelings contravene biblical revelation. Confessions direct men to

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the principles of scripture, by which all opinions and actions should be judged.

The confession of a church functions as a safeguard. The teachers of a church should never proclaim any doctrine contrary to the creedal statements of the church. The members of the congregation can then be assured that they (and their families) shall not be subjected to teachings outside the framework of their confession.

The officers of the church are bound to the confessional standards in a special way. Upon taking office, elders and deacons vow to uphold the beliefs of their church and protect them from subversion. The officers are themselves in submission to the standards, which have governing power in the courts of the church.

Finally, as hinted earlier, creeds serve as symbols of visible unity in the church. It has been asserted in this essay that churches should not be independent, but ought to be joined under a common government. Wherever a group of churches is bound together in a common government, their confession of faith underscores this vital truth. It testifies that the congregations share a set of beliefs, and are dedicated to seeing their beliefs preserved and disseminated.

Church Membership

AS CHRISTIANS, we are admonished not to forsake “the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is.” Yet, in our own day, cultural individualism has spilled over into the churches, producing an unhealthy atmosphere of religious independency among those professing Christ. The duty to join in public worship is often treated casually, and church attendance is regarded as a merely optional matter.

Heb. 10:25

When a professing Christian spurns corporate worship, he gives reason to question the state of his heart. Those who truly love God will exclaim with the psalmist, “I was glad when they said unto me, ‘Let us go into the house of the LORD.’”

Psalm 122:1

Moreover, the Christian’s obligations reach beyond simple attendance upon the public ordinances. The scriptures set forth numerous responsibilities of believers which can only be fulfilled within the context of the corporate body: pray for one another, exhort one another, share one another’s burdens, etc. Often, we meet with professing Christians who wish to remain detached from any particular congregation. But if they dwell permanently in isolation, how can they fulfill their scriptural duties?

James 5:15

Heb. 3:13

Gal. 6:2

1 Thess. 5:11

The Bible also delineates lines of authority within Christian congregations. “We beseech you, brethren, to know them

which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you, and esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake." "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch over your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you."

1 Thess. 5:12-13
Heb. 13:17

These passages describe the proper submission of church members to ecclesiastical officers. Members are not subjugated to officers as unto tyrants. The officers of the church rule not for private commodity, nor of personal authority, "neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock." Church members are obligated to render submission as subjects in the kingdom of Christ.

1 Pet. 5:3

Once we discern the duty of church membership, the issue becomes a question of which church to join. In the present era of religious confusion, there are myriads of assemblies in existence, all claiming to be true churches of the Lord Jesus Christ.

These facts lead us to consider the office of the believer. Christians have the obligation to submit to the government of Christ; but they also have the responsibility to refuse the claims of men who usurp the authority of Christ. "The sheep follow him [Christ]: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers."

John 10:4-5

Again, all legitimate religious authority is derived from Christ; thus, the true believer should not heed the authority of any ecclesiastical government which is not subject to Christ's word.

During the Protestant Reformation, Christians were confronted with a dilemma not unlike our own. They were perplexed by the conflicting claims of different groups claiming the title of Christ's church.

The leaders of the Protestant Reformation possessed a strong pastoral vision. When they formulated the Protestant confessions, they addressed the issue of church membership from a pastoral perspective. They instructed Christians to seek churches which bear these three marks: (1.) the true preaching of the gospel; (2.) the proper administration of the sacraments; (3.) the right exercise of church discipline.¹ This is sound advice for Christians in any era.

Rom. 10:17

“Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.” If a religious assembly has not the gospel of Christ, it is not worthy to be called a church. Without the gospel, there can be no true Christians; without true Christians, there can be no real church.

The administration of the sacraments is an indicator of a congregation's practices on worship. If an assembly substitutes man-made forms of worship, in place of the sacraments, it is not worthy to be recognized as a true church. And when a congregation adopts a multitude of humanly-devised “aids to worship,” as supplements to the biblical ordinances, the leaven of idolatry is already present. Christians must avoid

1. The marks of the church are treated specifically in The Confession of the English Congregation at Geneva (1556), the French Confession of Faith (1559), the Scottish Confession of Faith (1560), and the Belgic Confession of Faith (1561). See the bibliography for more details on these documents.

such corrupt worship, “for what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?” *2 Cor. 6:16*

Church discipline is designed to maintain the glory of God and the health of the church. If a person makes a profession of faith, but exhibits a life of moral corruption, men regard his profession as hypocrisy. Similarly, if an assembly claims the title of a church, while tolerating notorious heresies and scandals in its midst, it has degenerated so as to become no church of Christ, but a “synagogue of Satan.”² Any religious assembly which lacks discipline will soon become a haven for heresy and moral corruption. *Rev. 2:9; 3:9*

The Reformers warned Christians about false churches, urging them to keep away from the assemblies of Papists and Anabaptists. No one should become a member of such false churches, for they are synagogues of Satan.

By using the marks of the church as a guide, Christians can find and join sound churches. As noted, it is the office of church members to exercise discernment, especially as regards their ecclesiastical affiliations. Too often, church connections are formed on the basis of convenience, family expectations, or personal taste, rather than the scriptural principles which should govern this important duty.

2. Cf. Westminster Confession of Faith, 25:5.

Conclusion

THIS BRIEF SURVEY has demonstrated that the scriptures teach a form of government for the church of Jesus Christ. Biblical church government includes rule by a plurality of scripturally qualified elders. These elders convene in ecclesiastical courts where they settle disputes, adjudicate disciplinary and doctrinal cases, and handle normal administrative matters of the church. In making decisions, the church courts are to pass judgment based upon biblical law. The decisions of the courts, and their confessional formulations, have a binding governmental authority in the church.

The failure of American churches to abide by these principles of church polity has resulted in a multitude of practical problems. For example, a breakdown of ecclesiastical discipline may be traced to this disregard of biblical church government.

Church discipline rarely exists where presbyterian polity is absent. Within modern American “evangelical” churches, discipline is almost nonexistent. In the rare cases when discipline is attempted, it is often applied in an arbitrary or sporadic manner.

This breakdown of church discipline is a by-product of the highly independent and individualistic mentality which pervades the contemporary American religious scene. Local churches militantly assert their independence, and pastors as-

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sume their “callings” in an independent fashion, teaching and leading others according to their own private inclinations.

In presbyterian and reformed churches, the setting is better than the “system” of independency. Nevertheless, there is room for much improvement. Presbyterians need to embrace their heritage with greater appreciation. They must apply their principles with renewed vigor, and not be afraid to emphasize the distinctive elements of presbyterian polity.

In a related vein, recently there have been intense efforts to restore to America a proper recognition of biblical principles of civil government. While this goal is a worthy aim, the attempt has often come from ecclesiastical anarchists or those who regard church government with relative indifference. It is questionable whether these efforts will ever succeed unless the church puts her own house in order. After all, judgment begins with the house of God. How can the civil government be expected to conform to scriptural principles when the church does not bother to adhere to biblical polity? May the era soon come when both the church and the state are ordered according to scriptural principles of government.

1 Pet. 4:17

Once we recognize the importance of ecclesiastical polity, we must work to restore biblical church government. This endeavor will require considerable time and effort. Local congregations, as well as their denominations, are obliged to reform their practices, bringing their government into conformity with Christ’s word. On an individual level, Christians should press their churches to make necessary amendments.

In some cases, believers will need to reassess their ecclesiastical connections; they should not remain unequally yoked to

churches that openly disregard the word of God – congregations which make a mockery of the gospel, the sacraments, and church discipline.

Christians who live near a true church should unite with the congregation, provided that the congregation's terms of membership are lawful. In the present era of widespread apostasy, a problem often arises because Reformed families are scattered throughout the country, in small numbers, isolated by hundreds of miles from other families of like faith.

In this situation, many families should consider relocating, to join with other Christians. Of course, if they are unable to move, they must preserve true religion within their homes, until more ordinary church ties can be formed. They should pray and labor to form a true church of Christ in their locality, without allowing discouragement to lead them into compromising ecclesiastical connections.

A genuine reformation, along with the mature institutions of church government, may take a while to develop. Even in the heartland of Presbyterianism – the nation of Scotland – the church did not spring up fully organized overnight. When John Knox arrived in Edinburgh in 1559, Protestant congregations were meeting in homes, and there were only six known Protestant ministers to serve the needs of the whole nation.

Eventually, the regular structures of church government were adopted in Scotland, with the result that the Scottish church possessed ruling elders, deacons, sessions, presbyteries, and the general assembly. Still, these ecclesiastical institutions did not spring up instantly, *ex nihilo*, the moment Knox set foot upon the shore of his native land. The Scots labored many

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years to establish the more mature institutions of biblical church government. Much of the groundwork was laid during the earlier days, when the faithful worshipped in homes, without the benefit of a regular ministry. No one should discount the importance of a regular ministry; but neither should we despise “the day of small beginnings” which may lead to greater things.

Zech. 4:10
Hag. 2:3

The foregoing discussion demonstrates the practical importance of church government. Yet, we have obtained only a cursory glance at the far-reaching ramifications of the subject. Christians must realize that, far from being classified with secondary issues of minor importance, church government is a vital issue which affects the overall health and strength of the church. In an era when the church is plagued by a multitude of problems which render her weak and ineffective, the situation calls loudly for a return to biblical church government. Will that call be heeded?

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