

Presbyterianism

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Does It Matter?

On 24th August 1662, some two thousand of the finest preachers of the gospel England has ever seen were ejected from the Church of England because they refused to fall in line with the "Act of Uniformity" framed by the civil authorities. One of the objectionable requirements of this act was that ministers who had been ordained by a presbytery must submit to re-ordination by a bishop. This they would not do. The blow inflicted on the Church of England is one from which it has not to this day recovered. Likewise, no reader of Scottish / Irish church history can fail to be aware of how constantly the question of church government comes to the fore. Shall the Monarch have control of the church? Shall the church be governed by bishops or by assemblies of ministers and other elders? These questions crop up with amazing regularity and men were willing to suffer and die for what they considered the right answer to them.

Much Ado About Nothing?

To many Christians today these historical convulsions over issues like church government are a relic of the past only and convey an atmosphere which they find uncongenial. The early Covenanters, for example, with their insistence that the form of church government must be Presbyterian displayed a rigidity that, it is thought, should be left behind us in the history books. Is this correct?

Is Common Sense Enough?

Surely, it may be said, we can just sort out church organisation in the same way as any other body such as the Women's Institute, the Tennis Club, or the Musical Appreciation Society? A bit of common sense is all that is needed to work out what will best facilitate the spiritual functions of the Church.

Whose Church Is It Anyway?

The problem with the "common sense" approach is that it overlooks one vital truth. The Church is the Church of Jesus Christ. He is the Head of the body. This means that the Church is dependent upon Christ for its life and the gifts of the individual members (1 Corinthians 12:12&13; Ephesians 4:7-12). It also means, however, that the Church is to consciously submit to the authority of Christ. This is true of the individual and family lives of the members, but it is also true of the life of the church as an organisation (Ephesians 5 23, 24).

In fact, we shall find later that Christ gave the necessary gifts for the offices He has appointed in the Church. This being so, we cannot expect the gifts necessary to be provided for church-officers we invent.

What are the Options?

It would probably be impossible to determine the number of possible ways of governing the church. Historically however, there have usually been three main ways that have found support; Episcopalian, Independent and Presbyterian.

1. Episcopalian.

This name comes from the Greek word 'episkopi', which means 'overseer' (translated 'bishop' in the King James version 1 Timothy 3:1; Titus 1 :7 etc). On this view there are three basic kinds of church officer, the Bishop, the Presbyter (often very wrongly called 'priests') and the Deacon. The second and third of these are office bearers in the local congregation while the bishop exercises authority over a wider area and the local officers within that area are answerable to him. Along with these three bas with these three basic strands of office, various subdivisions usually exist, i.e. Archbishops, Canons, Archdeacons etc.

2. Independent.

Independents hold that Church government stops with the local congregation and that any meeting of office bearers of several congregations is simply for advice and consultation and that no wider body outside the local congregation may exercise authoritative discipline over that congregation.

Independents are often, although not always, congregationalists as well. By this term we mean that the office bearers do not act directly under Christ but as the representatives of the congregation. The congregation is the final court of appeal on earth under Christ.

3. Presbyterian.

Presbyterians reject Independency but also reject a hierarchy of offices. There is no higher office than the local elder (Greek 'presbuteros', hence 'presbyterian'), but elders from several congregations can meet together in what are normally called presbyteries or synods for acts of government over several congregations together.

As well as these basic views of the government of the church within itself, there are differing views over the relationship of church and state. Rejecting the Roman Catholic view of the church (i.e. the Papacy) controlling the civil ruler, some Protestants have held that the civil ruler (at least if Christian) should govern the church. Others hold that the church and state should have no connection whatever. A third view is that the church and state are separate, both to be governed under Christ and His Word, but with certain specific duties to each other assigned by Christ.

Does God Only Bless Presbyterians?

God has blessed the labours of men who held to different views of Church government. Spurgeon was an independent. Whitefield was ordained by a bishop. Yet God blessed their preaching to the conversion of multitudes to Christ. Is it not, we may say, a little presumptuous of us to stand for a principle which some of the great Christians of the past have differed? This would mean however, that we simply become non-committal on every issue on which some eminent Christians of the past have not been able to agree. We would end up only accepting those matters which have the "unanimous consent of the fathers" (to borrow the Roman Catholic phrase).

No, even though disagreeing with some of the godly, we are still required to follow all that we are convinced to be according to the Word of God. Certainly we must keep a sense of proportion. Right views of church government are not the answer to all the Church's problems, though it can greatly affect the long-term welfare of the Church. Church government isn't everything, but neither is it nothing. We are not free to ignore anything in the Word of God. Can it ever be in the interest of the Church to do so? Well? What does the Bible teach?

Local Officers – What?

In the last section we concluded that Christ the King has the right to appoint the form of church government. He decides what offices, as well as the qualifications for, method of appointment to and functions of those offices. This is why writers of the past spoke of a "Divine Right" of church government. They believed there was a form of church government that had the approval and authority of Christ.

Thankful Listening

Should Christ gives gifts to individual church members, placing upon them the obligation to use them for the benefit of the whole body (1 Corinthians 12:4–27). Christ has appointed that certain functions within the church (of a more public nature) are to be performed by members who have been specifically and publicly appointed to those functions by ordination (more on ordination later). Among the gifts Christ gives to particular members are those which match up to these ordained offices. This being so, the study of church government should not be seen as a bore. It should be viewed as an attempt to work out gratefully Christ's gracious plan and provision for His church. These are tokens of His love and care. That alone gives the subject special interest among the Lord's people.

Royal Appointment

1 Foundation Offices.

"And are built upon the foundation of apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone" (Ephesians 2:20). Christ alone is the foundation of our salvation. We rest entirely upon Him. We are built upon the apostles and prophets in the sense that God has made known His truth through apostles and prophets. It is in the realm of revelation that we are built upon them. They were infallible messages of God and all the infallible truth God intended us to have he caused them to write, and we have it in the Bible. Now that the Bible is complete, we do not need direct messages from heaven and so we do not have apostles or prophets. It is because of their distinctive role as infallible spokesmen for God that apostles and prophets are first in the list of gifts of the Spirit, in Ephesians 4:11 and 1 Corinthians 12:28. In the first of the passages mention is made of "Evangelists". If 2 Timothy 4:5 indicates that men like Timothy fulfilled the office of evangelist, then this name was applied to a unique body of men who acted as assistants to the apostles and whose call to office involved direct revelation from the Lord (see 1 Timothy 4:14). Certainly, Timothy and Titus in some respects occupied a unique and unrepeatable position because of their relationship to the apostle Paul who supervised their movements, often leaving them to carry on the ministry after the initial founding of a church while Paul pressed on to a new place.

2 Continuing offices.

With no apostles and prophets and yet a completed Bible, Christ has appointed other offices whose work is to continue until the last day. Their role is not to convey new revelation from God, but to expound the complete written Word, implement the ordinances appointed in that Word and care for the flock according to the Word. The Scriptures describe these continuing offices by the terms; elders, bishops, pastors and teachers, deacons. What are they?

Elders

1. Elders and Bishops are the same thing

The word "presbuteros" is translated 'elder' (Acts 15:2; 20:17, Titus 1:5, 1 Peter 5:1 etc). "Episkopos" is translated 'bishop' (AV 1 Timothy 3:1, Philippians 1:1) or 'overseer' (Acts 20:28). A look at Titus 1:5–7 and Acts 20:17,28 shows that both words refer to the same thing. 1 Peter 5:2 shows that the elders took the "oversight". The idea of elders would have been familiar to Jewish Christians as the synagogues were governed by a body of elders and the Old Testament often refers to elders. The name overseer is more descriptive of the work of elders.

2. All elders are pastors or shepherds

The elders are to "feed" or to "shepherd" the flock of God (Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:2). They are to care for the flock as those acting under Christ, the Chief Shepherd and Bishop (or Overseer) of our souls (1 Peter 2:5 and 5:4).

3. Every Congregation should have elders.

Elders existed in Jerusalem, Philippi, Ephesus and Crete (Acts 15:2, 20:17, Phlippians 1:1, Titus 1:5). Their presence was the norm.

4. Some Elders are ministers of the word.

Paul tells Timothy "let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour especially they that labour in the word and doctrine" (1 Timothy 5:17). This indicates that some elders as well as ruling and governing the church along with the others, also have the particular task of preaching the Word. So Romans 12:7–8 distinguishes between "teaching" and "ruling". The gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:28 include "teachers" and "governments". In Ephesians 4:11 there are those who are pastors and teachers (ie shepherds/elders and also teachers of the Word).

The word "minister" is applied in the New Testament to various kinds of service including the ministry of the Word (Ephesians 3:7, Colossians 1:7, 1 Thessalonians 3:2, 1 Timothy 4:6). With the discontinuation of the foundational teaching of offices of apostles and prophets, the general term is usually applied to the teaching elders. Nevertheless, apart from the ministry of the Word all the elders are equally responsible to "watch for souls" (Hebrews 13:17) and accountable for their stewardship.

Elders and Deacons

Eldership in the local church

We have seen that each congregation is to have elders and at least one of these elders is to be a minister of the Word (1 Timothy 5:17). In the Reformed Presbyterian Church each congregation has a body of elders (traditionally called the 'Session'). The minister usually acts as Moderator (another name for chairman). Where there are insufficient elders or no minister 'interim elders' or an 'interim moderator' are appointed so that each congregation has a session of at least one minister and two other elders responsible for its care.

Behind the official language a biblical principle is being upheld, namely that each congregation should be under the oversight of a body of elders, including both kinds of elders (ministers/ruling elders). If we can distinguish scriptural principle in the midst of customary presbyterian language it helps!

Deacons

1. Deacons are different from elders.

The Philippian church had 'bishops and deacons' (Philippians 1:1). 1 Timothy chapter 3 gives separate lists of qualifications for bishops (elders) and deacons (see verses 1–8).

2. Deacons were new.

Although in Israel the poor were cared for in various ways, the office of deacon, unlike the eldership, apparently began in New Testament times. Acts 6:1–7 is regarded as the beginning of the diaconate. The newness of the office perhaps explains the specific and detailed account of its origin under the apostles of Christ, whereas the eldership simply appears on the pages of the New Testament as the continuation of a thing known in the Old Testament.

Indeed, it is a good general point to remember that the book of Acts focuses attention on the differences between the church in the Old Testament and the church in the New. What is not repealed by God simply continues. For example, the evangelisation of the nations is given prominence whereas the building up of the church through the family is largely assumed to continue as in the Old Testament. The introduction of Baptism, rather than circumcision, as the sign of the covenant and of church membership is spelled out, but the place of the children of believers in the covenant and visible church is mainly taken for granted. The change of the weekly day of worship to the first day of the week to commemorate the resurrection of Christ is clearly indicated, but that this is the continuation of the weekly and universally required Sabbath of creation is assumed. Likewise, the beginning of the diaconate is given whereas the eldership simply appears as a thing already known.

3. The Deacons work is with physical needs.

They are to look after the material side of the church's affairs. In Acts chapter 6, it was to relieve the apostles of the work of caring for the poor widows of the church that the diaconate was formed.

When the church has lost sight of the true functions of the eldership, the distinction between elders and deacons will hardly seem necessary, since the handing round of the bread and wine at communion will be virtually the only distinctive eldership activity observable. This happens either when a church is so dead that spiritual matters no longer feature and there is only money and fabric left to think about or when a church sincerely but wrongly sees the spiritual care of the flock as basically the concern of the minister alone. Alternatively, the need for deacons can be lost sight of by a low view of the ministry of the Word altogether. People who only want a minister to give a trifling little talk once a week will inevitably expect him to be an ecclesiastical 'Jack-of-all-trades'. Nevertheless, for church members to call a man to be first and foremost a 'minister of the Word' while wanting minimal ministry of the Word is hypocrisy

and deceit. On the other hand, where there is an appetite for the truth and a real commitment to attending upon the preaching and teaching of God's Word, then the apostolic division of labour makes sense, "It is not reason that we should leave the Word of God and serve tables. Wherefore brethren look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word" (Acts 6:2–4).

4. The Deacons must be spiritual.

Whilst in 1 Timothy 3:8–13 the qualifications for deacons place less emphasis on doctrinal ability, they must still be spiritual men in the Biblical sense of 'full of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 6:3). To handle the temporal affairs of the church under Christ and to His glory requires more than being good with figures. It requires godliness.

The Right Connections

We have been looking so far mainly at the local congregation. Now we move to the question of connections. What should be the connection between one congregation and another? What should be the connection, if any, between the Church and the state? We look at the first of these questions this time.

No Hierarchy

Episcopalians favour the idea of certain ministers acting as "bishops", that is as a higher level of minister with authority over several congregations and their office-bearers.

That the word "bishop" itself refers to the same office as "elder" (see previous sections) in the New Testament is usually acknowledged nowadays even by those who favour this view. Nevertheless, terms apart, appeal is made to the case of men like Timothy and Titus as justification for a higher office with wider authority outside the local congregation.

This is not so. The role of Timothy and Titus differs from that of, say, a Church of Ireland bishop in several ways. They acted under the direction of the apostles and as their assistants. Today there are no apostles to assist. Their call like that of the apostles, involved direct revelation not promotion (1 Timothy 4:14). They did not stay permanently in the one place but only for a time to help establish and settle a church (e.g. Titus 1:5). We find them constantly on the move at the direction of the Apostle Paul.

One Body

The church is described as the body of Christ of which he is the Head (Ephesians 1:22–23, 5:23 etc.). There are not several bodies of Christ only one. This idea is prominent in 1 Corinthians 12. In verses 27–28 we read 'now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular and God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers.

Gifts For the Body

The list includes offices like the apostles which were not based in a particular congregation and other temporary gifts that were given only while scripture was still being completed. Nevertheless, it also includes the continuing gifts and offices that are linked to a particular local congregation. This means that the gifts given to individuals in the local congregation are for the benefits of that congregation first of all, but not only so. The list includes the gift of "governments" (verse 28). Just as the labours of the minister are not confined to his own congregation, but his gifts are to be used to some extent to edify other parts of the church, so ruling gifts of the eldership are to find wider application.

Church and Churches

The word "church" is used of a single congregation. It is also true that several congregations can be called churches (1 Corinthians 11:16, Galatians 1:2). At the same time, the people of God as a whole even on earth, are called "the church" (singular), (Galatians 1:13, Philippians 3:6). Christ builds one church (Matthew 16:18). Also in the larger cities where several congregations undoubtedly existed, the group of congregations is still called the church and the elders of that group are called the elders of that church. So, for example, in Jerusalem the vast numbers of believers and the number of apostles preaching regularly indicates that they would have met in several congregations (Acts 12:24; 21:20) yet we find reference to "the church which was at Jerusalem" (Acts 8:1 cf. Acts 12:5, and 15:4). At Ephesus a church met in the house of Aquilla and Priscilla (1 Corinthians 16:19 – written from Ephesus – see Acts 19) yet this could hardly be all the Christians at Ephesus (Acts 19:18–20). Still we find reference to the church at Ephesus and the elders of the church (Acts 20:17 and Revelation 2:1).

All of this leads us to conclude that there were several congregations in close proximity and rendered it geographically possible, the elders exercised a joint oversight over those congregations together. This is also in line with the practice in the Jewish synagogues. Where there were several synagogues in one city, they were governed by what we would call a presbytery of elders of all those synagogues. The Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, though including priests which do not exist in the New Testament church, was essentially an eldership body and acted rather like the Synod or General Assembly of a Presbyterian church.

A Biblical Synod

Acts 15 contains an account of the action taken when men brought in heresy at the church at Antioch (verse 1). Paul and Barnabas referred the matter to the elders at Jerusalem (verse 2). After discussions, decisions were reached (verses 19–23). The people concurred in the decisions (verse 22) and joined in the greetings sent to the church at Antioch etc (verse 23), but the decisions were those of the "apostles and elders" only (see Acts 16:4). It was an act of government, not of apostles only but of elders also. Thus, when there are no apostles, such councils or synods are part of the proper function of the continuing eldership of the church. This unity of government can transcend even cultural differences such as that between Antioch and Jerusalem.

There are many lessons in Acts 15 on how presbyteries and Synods should use their authority, but they must wait until later. What is clear is that for a congregation to remain independent when wider fellowship in church government (as well as in other ways) is possible is a mistake. Episcopacy rightly recognises the need for unity in church government but wrongly invents a hierarchy of office to achieve it. Presbyterianism expresses the biblical teaching that since the disappearance of the apostolic office the connecting link between congregations in church government is through the elders meeting in wider and therefore higher assemblies which for convenience we call presbyteries, synods etc.

Individualism Restrained

In today's world where everyone wants to "do his own thing", Christians have to resist the temptation to think they don't need the fellowship and oversight of the church. Individual congregations must resist that temptation also by seeking fellowship with other congregations and expressing that fellowship even in joint church government by the elders of such congregations acting together. Isolation can easily lead to doctrinal and practical eccentricity in the individual Christian or congregation. We need the checks and balances of biblical presbyterianism. " ... yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace unto the humble". (1 Peter 5:5).

The Sword and the Keys

The Sword

The basic function of the state is to punish the evildoer. In Romans 12:19, the Apostle Paul quotes the scripture "Vengeance is mine: I will repay, saith the Lord". He then shows that since it belongs to God to punish sin, private revenge by individuals is wrong. (Verses 20,21).

Continuing into Chapter 13, however, since the civil ruler is the "minister of God", when sin expresses itself in open crime, God requires the ruler to execute vengeance in His name, having delegated a limited authority to him for that end.

The principle that vengeance belongs to God both prohibits private revenge and requires punishment of crime by the ruler. This duty to punish the criminal is called the "bearing of the sword", (verse 4) showing that it extends to the sentence of capital punishment. The duty of submission to rulers rests on the fact that "the powers that be are ordained of God". This means not simply that they exist in God's providence, but that civil government is His institution. It follows that His law should be the ruler's definition of right and wrong and open or and wrong and open or public transgression of that law should be the basic definition of crime. (See also 1 Peter 2:13–16).

It is the duty of rulers, not only in their personal lives, but also as rulers to submit to God and to His Christ (Psalm 2:10 – 12, Revelation 1:5, 1 Timothy 6:15). For men to act independently of the Word of God is always wrong.

The Keys

"And I will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 16:19). The Church's authority lies in a different realm to that of the state. The church's function relates to the gospel of grace rather than to civil justice. The church exercises the "power of the keys" by the preaching of the gospel, in which the door to the kingdom is opened. Not only in the preaching of the Word, is the line of demarcation between the children of the kingdom and the children of the world made clear, but in the discipline of the Church that distinction is applied within the limits of fallible human observation of outward profession and practice. (Matthew 18:17, 1 Corinthians 5:9– 13 etc.).

Distinct under Christ

We conclude that church and state are both to acknowledge Christ as King and both to submit to the Word of God. Nevertheless, they are separate institutions with different membership, functions and officers. On top of this Christ has appointed a definite form of church government in which kings and magistrates have no place.

In the Old Testament, kings were punished in Israel for intruding into the role of the priesthood (1 Samuel 13:11–13, 2 Chronicles 26:16–21). Seventeenth century Presbyterians wrote at length on this subject, showing that even in Israel, civil and ecclesiastical government were distinguishable from each other. The New Testament makes this clearer still.

This means that Rome's view that for a nation to be Christian it must be church controlled is to be rejected. Likewise, the view (known as Erastianism) that the monarch at least if he is a professing Christian, should govern the church is also rejected. Church and state are distinct under Christ and our forefathers were correct when they saw resistance to state interference in the church as an expression of their loyalty to King Jesus.

The Right Link-Up

The right connection between church and state is one of mutual obligation under Christ.

A. The State must recognise and accommodate Christ's church.

Since civil rulers are under Christ and are to base civil law on God's law, then so far as it comes within their proper scope of activity, they must, on the basis of the first four commandments, distinguish between the true religion and the false. They are to pave the way for the Church's function of upholding and spreading the truth. This is their duty to Him who is the prince of the Kings of the earth as well as the Head of the church. Since Christ in providence governs all for the good of the church, then rulers must show their submission to him by consciously using their God-given authority in the interests of the church also. If we are to pray "For kings and all in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty" (1 Timothy 2:2), then kings are to promote that which we are to pray for.

Rulers are not to govern within the church but use their legitimate authority outside the church to facilitate the church in the exercise of its distinctive functions. "And kings shall be thy nursing fathers and queens thy nursing mothers", (Isaiah 49:23, see also Isaiah 60:12 & 16).

B. The church must teach the state.

It is the church's duty to "declare all the counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).

All that is in the Word of God is within the church's teaching function. This means that all the Word of God says about how a nation is to be governed is to be part of our testimony in the world. Also, civil rulers, like everybody else, are appropriate recipients of that testimony.

When the people, the publicans and the soldiers asked John the Baptist what form their repentance should take in practice, he gave definite answers (Luke 3:10 – 14). If Tony Blair and his cabinet repented of their sins and were asking the church what the Word of God says about running the country to the glory of God the church should be able to respond.

"I will speak of thy testimonies also before kings, and will not be ashamed" (Psalms 119:46).

Presbyterianism – For What?

"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you..." (Matt 28: 19–20).

OK, so presbyterianism is the Biblical form of church government, but what exactly is this "governing" anyway?

Limited Functions

As Christ is the King of the church, He appoints the functions of the church, that is the church in the sense of an organised body. There are many legitimate activities that Christians individually and as a group may engage in, but the instituted church has specific functions appointed by Christ.

Limited Authority

The eldership of the church, whether we think of the local session or the higher presbyterial bodies, always has a limited authority. They are to act under Christ, the Chief Shepherd. "Whatsoever I have commanded you", is the circumference of church authority and the church's governing bodies should take great care to go up to but not across that line. So the synod at Jerusalem could say, "It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things." (Acts 15:28). The word "teach" in Matthew 28:19 means "to disciple" or "to make disciples of". This is the great work of the church empowered by and under the authority of Christ.

Making New Disciples

A The Church's Job.

Apart from the witness of the individual Christian, the only evangelistic or missionary agency mentioned in Scripture is the church. Other missionary organisations exist largely as a result of either the failure of the church to evangelise or as a stopgap because of the fragmented state of the church. We should not, however, lose sight of the Biblical ideal or give up working towards it.

B Local Evangelisation.

The church should always be engaged in evangelism by those straightforward methods found in Scripture, avoiding underhand or entertainment methods of human invention (2 Corinthians 4:1–3). The role of the eldership should be more than simply approving what a few enthusiasts in the congregation want to do. They should lead.

C The Wider Mission.

The wider missionary work of the church should also be led by the eldership. Even when direct revelation was given of Paul and

Barnabas' call to a particular missionary work, that revelation was received by what was essentially a presbytery at Antioch and they sent the missionaries out (Acts 13:1–3). Biblical presbyterianism is well designed to further co-ordinated missionary work, provided we depend on Christ the King to bless the work and build His church by adding new disciples to it. (Acts 2:47, 13:48, 16:14).

Recognising Disciples

A. The Impossible Not Expected.

Baptism is the sign of church membership. Although administered by the minister, the whole eldership is responsible before the Lord for determining who shall be baptised on the basis of His Word. Those who give credible profession of faith are to be recognised by Baptism (unless previously baptised) as members of the professing church on earth, though this is not and cannot be an infallible declaration that they are born again. The session can only see the outward God knows the heart (Acts 5:1–11; 8:13, 20–23, 2 Corinthians 13:5 etc.). Faithfulness within the limits of our knowledge is what is required. If outward profession and practice indicate that a person is not converted he must not be admitted.

B Junior Members.

Baptism replaces Old Testament circumcision (Colossians 2:11–12), however, whereas in the Old Testament the women were incorporated in the sign given to men, in the New Testament the sign given personally to male and female (Acts 8:12; 16:15). Beyond these Divinely revealed alterations, the administration of the sign of membership of God's covenant people must continue as in the Old Testament. What the Lord does not change, we must not change. Abraham was circumcised as a believer (Romans 4:11), but his children were to be circumcised as well (Genesis 17, Exodus 12:48). Therefore the children of professing Christians are to be baptised, but only admitted to the full active responsibilities of their church membership (including the Lord's Supper) when they give mature credible profession of faith in Christ or themselves. (Infants did not and could not have taken the passover, the Old Testament forerunner of the Lord's Supper, Exodus 12:26).

Perfect Church Purity in Heaven Only.

The eldership is to seek to mark out the boundaries of the congregation of the Lord, the visible church, as required by the church's King. They must however, discourage a misplaced confidence in that outward membership, a sin of which the Jews of Christ's day were so often guilty only the genuine believer belongs to the perfected church of heaven.

Discipline Among Disciples

A. Suspension and Excommunication.

All church members sin. When, however a church member pursues a course of defiance of God's Word after exhortation, the privileges of membership must be withheld, though at this stage he is still regarded as a brother (2 Thessalonians 3:14,15). If resistance to the Word continues must ultimately be regarded as "an heathen man and a publican" (Matthew 18:17) ie an unbeliever and an apostate.

B. Medicinal and Surgical.

The purpose of such discipline is first of all to seek the cure of the offending member by his coming to repentance. It is also, if it goes the full length, to be surgical, preserving the purity of the whole body (1 Corinthians 5:4–7), though even then, repentance is not to be despaired of. The way back into all the privileges of membership is open when repentance is clearly evident (2 Corinthians 2:5–7).

C. Not Optional.

Failure by the eldership to exercise discipline when Biblically required is not love but selfishness. To seek a quiet life by allowing sin to go unchecked or to allow someone the status of being counted a Christian, when he is evidently not a disciple of Christ, is to act unfaithfully to men's souls. No one should be encouraged in a false sense of security and the potential hostility at least in the short term if not more, to the exercise of discipline should not deflect the eldership from its duty. After all, Christ is not glorified by the church allowing itself to become indistinguishable from the

world. The elders should love unselfishly by doing the necessary, though unpopular, thing though unpopular, thing, (2 Corinthians 12:15).

Strengthening The Disciples

A. Teaching.

The elders must ensure that the flock are taught the truth. (Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:1,2). The preaching and teaching of God's Word is a means of strengthening the people of God. The minister is to preach everything that God has revealed, (Acts 20:20, 25–27) so that they may be more consistent disciples of Christ (Ephesians 4:11–16). In counselling those with problems and troubles, sympathy should not be lacking, but the Word must also be brought to bear upon the situation. Indeed, the elders in all their dealings with the flock should not be afraid to lean upon the Word to guide and instruct the members.

B. Worship.

The eldership have responsibility for the church's worship. Preaching of the Word is one part of that worship, but there are several other ordinances appointed by the Lord to strengthen his disciples. Sometimes impatience is expressed with our simple form of worship. But we should rejoice in the fact that the ministers and elders of our church have refused to impose on the flock of God anything that is not known to have Christ's authority. This is in line with our comments at the beginning about the limits of church authority. This is not a burdensome restriction but freedom from the commandments of men. The Lord's ordinances are best suited to teach us to love the Lord. "Whatsoever I have commanded" – this is the key! How much better this, than the form of worship being determined by whoever has the strongest will to impose his preferences. Freedom in Christ is freedom under Christ.

Responsibilities and Rights

Together

Pride makes us much more touchy about our rights than our responsibilities. It is easy to be rather vocal when we think our rights are being ignored and strangely quiet in the face of our neglected responsibility. For that reason, we'll spend more of this article on what we are most inclined to bypass.

Responsibilities

In any Christian church there are many God-given responsibilities that the members have toward each other. We are to be kind to one another, forgive one another, love one another, bear on another's burdens, exhort one another, provoke one another to good works, comfort one another. To be technically correct about church-government and yet neglect the basics gives a disfigured impression of what the body of Christ is meant to be like in the midst of a needy world in darkness. Nevertheless, we do need to look at responsibilities towards the government of the church.

A. Learning

A fundamental mark of the genuine convert is discipleship. He wants to follow and so he wants to learn in order to follow.

If you want to follow Christ, you will make every effort to be present when the Word is being expounded, not just to "support the minister", but because you want to be there and you feel the need to be there. You are not doing God a favour; He is doing you one by giving you the opportunity to learn. The converts at Lystra accepted teaching (Acts 14:21), and so should we. When any of the elders counsel you from the Word, a willingness to listen should be evident.

B. Submission

"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls..." (Hebrews 13:17).

In all matters which are the proper concern of the church, you should submit to the decisions of the eldership of the church. Even if you think they may not have made the best decision, provided no sin is involved, fall in line to the glory of God and for the peace and order of the church. Too many uproars in churches are over trivia where no matter of real Biblical principle is involved.

As far as possible, uphold the good name of the members of session. Avoid those social situations where people delight in expressing indignation at the latest misdemeanour of a minister or elder.

C. Support of the Testimony

If the session is making efforts to bring the Gospel to the people of the district, give your wholehearted support. Put other things to one side, even other Christian activities if i> 28:15).

D. Support of Biblical Discipline

If the elders find it necessary to exercise discipline, the members should help the effectiveness of that discipline, not undermine it. The main aim of such discipline is the good of the offender, to bring him to repentance. You must encourage him towards such repentance. Urge him to heed to the exhortation of the minister and elders. Don't be two faced, giving verbal agreement that the session's action is biblical in one situation and yet agreeing in the presence of

the offender that he's had a raw deal. Assure him of your love, but love him wisely. Take the flack to the glory of God and for the good of his soul. This must be done even when family ties are involved.

E. Prayer

Failure to pray is either failure to believe or failure to care. You either don't believe the minister and elders need the Lord's help or you don't care whether they have it. If you don't pray for them and you are tempted to criticise them, don't. Your words will not proceed from a right motive and are likely to have a purely negative, wounding effect without any positive benefit.

Rights

There are privileges that all the people of God should have within the body of Christ. Fellowship in Christ in corporate worship and witness and mutual care for one another are among these. But what about members rights as far as the office-bearers are concerned?

You are not necessarily entitled to brilliance in the pulpit but you are entitled to hear an honest attempt to expound the Scriptures week by week. You should have opportunity to join in all the ordinances of worship the Lord has appointed in His Word. You should receive pastoral care from your session and Biblical answers to your questions, if possible. In more formal terms, church members' rights include the following

A. Sacraments

If you are a Christian, walking with the Lord, you should be baptised (if not already), your children should be baptised and you should be admitted to the Lord's Supper for your encouragement and strengthening in the faith.

B. Election of Officers

In history, presbyterians have been prepared even to defy the civil courts rather than have ministers forced upon a congregation against their will. Election of local office-bearers is a right Christ has bestowed upon the congregational membership, subject to ordination by session or presbytery.

C. Access to the Eldership Bodies

In Acts 15:1-2, a disagreement in the Antioch church was referred to a wider eldership body. In the Reformed Presbyterian Church every member has the right to bring matters to the session. If not satisfied, he then has the right to bring a matter to the presbytery and synod. Such access to the higher eldership bodies is something for which to be thankful, though to be used with restraint and where a real issue of Biblical principle is to be resolved. This reference to the wider church can reduce the number of unnecessary divisions in churches.

Sometimes Presbyterians have made church government seem a very complex affair and it would be naive to assume that we as a denomination have entirely escaped this. Perhaps sometimes the biblical concepts get lost in a sea of ecclesiastical jargon. Nevertheless, behind all the "presby-speak", there are principles that are Biblical and beneficial and these should be prized.

Presbyterianism should express, in a non-hierarchical way, the unity of the whole body. Even so, the right form of church-government alone will never preserve the unity. Let us pray for our church and for the unity of the Spirit within it. Pray for a God-given reviving among us that the time for the Lord to favour Zion may come. (Psalm 102:13).