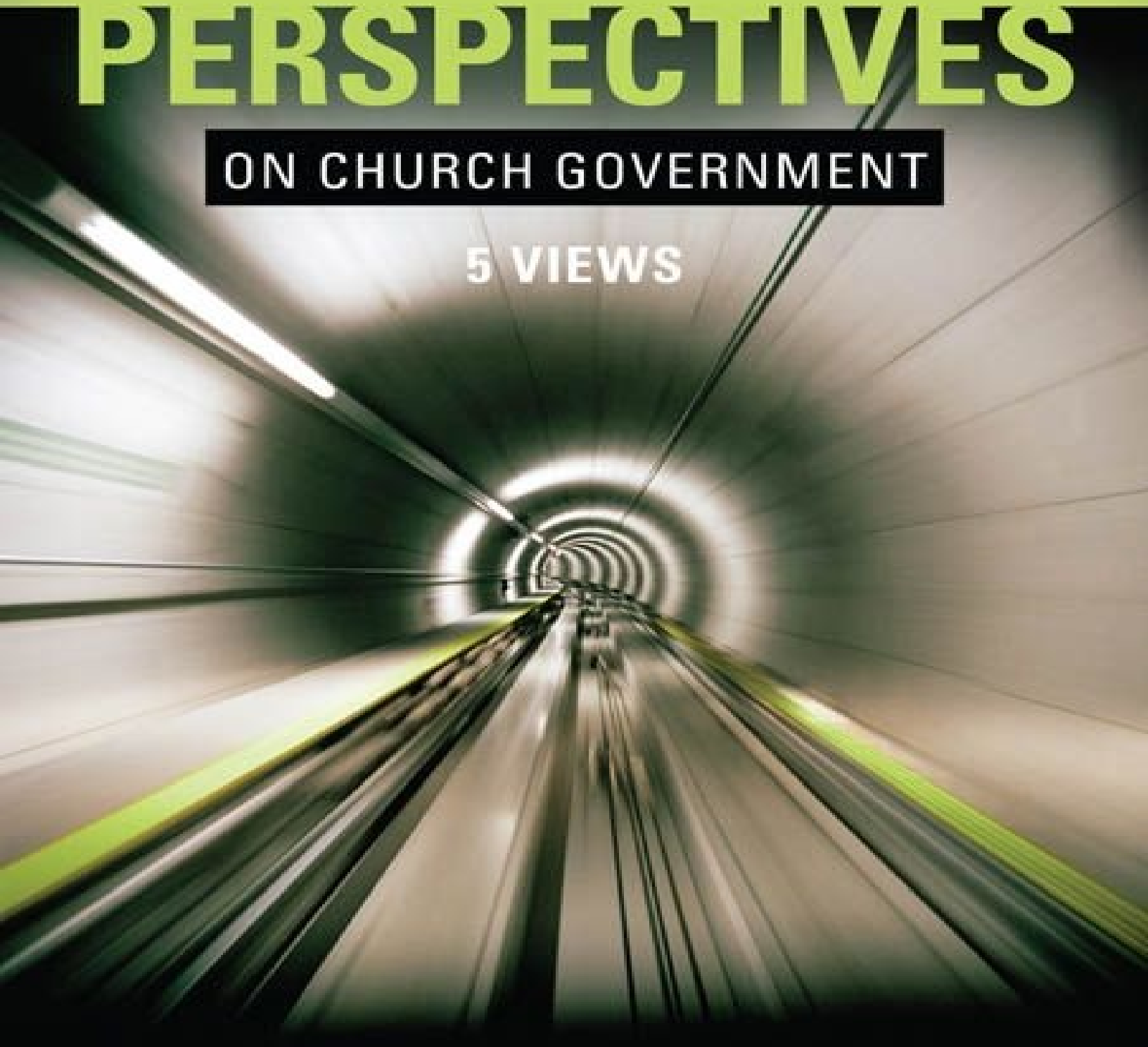
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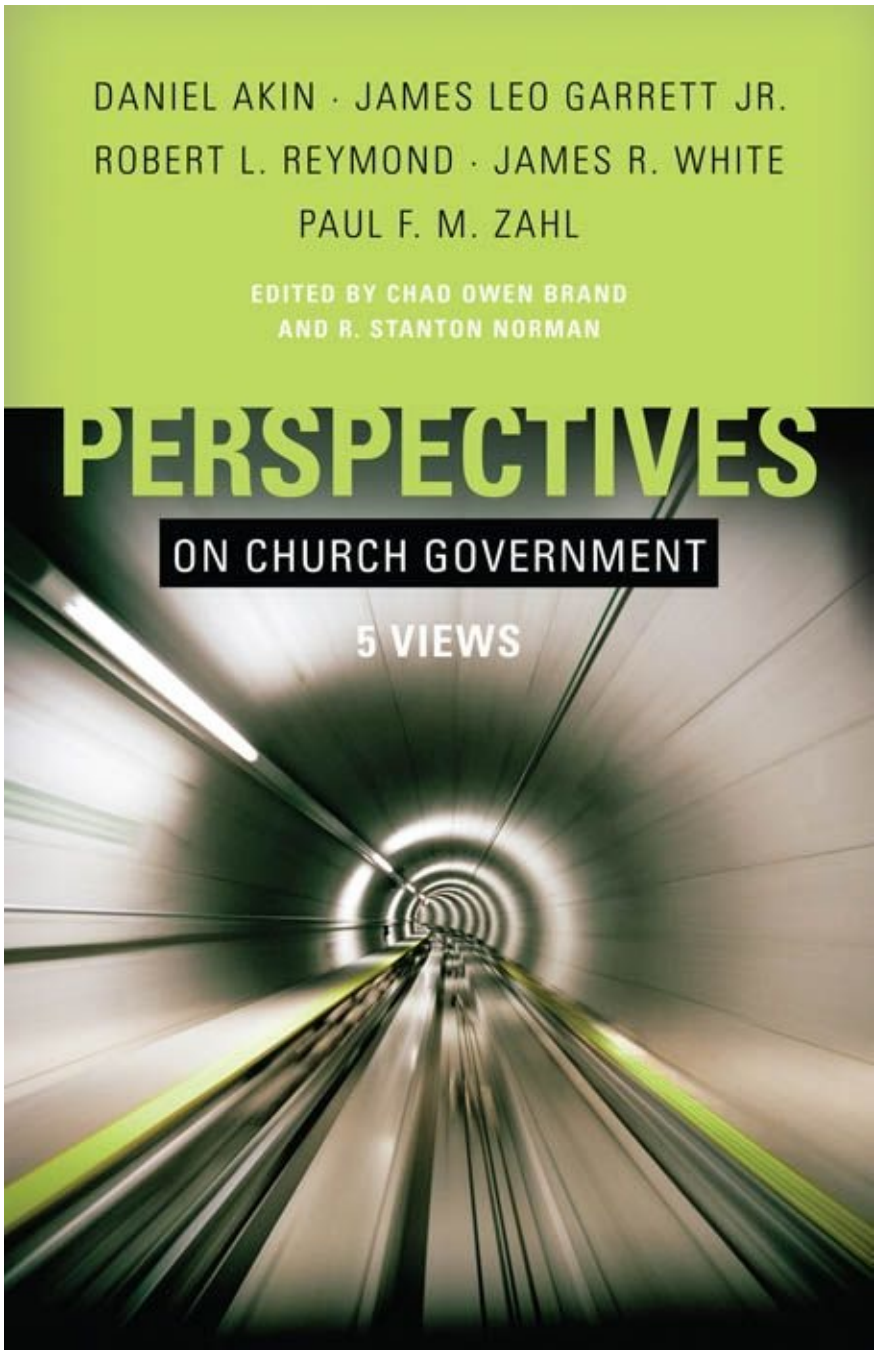
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AND R. STANTON NORMAN

PERSPECTIVES

ON CHURCH GOVERNMENT

5 VIEWS




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AND R. STANTON NORMAN**



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This book is affectionately dedicated to:
Edd and Nancy Brand
Bob and Peggy Norman

We are eternally indebted to
your spiritual investment in our lives.

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Preface

The cast of characters that has contributed to the completion of this volume is too large to list, but I (Chad) must mention a few very important contributions. Pride of place goes to my wife, Tina. She has endured long hours of listening to me type away at editing or writing while she was engaged in, often, more important duties around the house. All of my publishing and other ministry commitments are also hers, and I am grateful that God has blessed me with a partner in service and life who understands the call of God upon us. I am truly blessed by the Lord! My children still at home, Chad and Cassandra, have often had to live with a dad who was squirreled away in a book or clacking on the keyboard. They have been most gracious in supporting me in the process, and to them goes a good deal of credit for the completion of this book. Though my older and married daughter, Tashia, and her husband, Kyle, have not been here to live with this project, their share in my previous labors is, at this point, affectionately noted and appreciated.

Others besides family have also played a part. I am indebted to Russell Moore, assistant professor of Christian Theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, for critiquing the Introduction and for good counsel on several matters related to this volume. Insofar as I have taken his advice, this is surely a better book; where I did not heed him, time may well prove him to be the better advisor. My other colleagues in the Department of Theology at Southern, Stephen Wellum, Bruce Ware, and Gregg Allison, also offered helpful prodding at key moments in the process, as did my dear friend and colleague at two different institutions, Charles Draper. Two successive deans of Boyce College, Dr. Ted Cabal, now professor of philosophy at Southern, and the current dean, Dr. Jerry Johnson, have also been my cheerleaders along the path. It is truly humbling and a genuine joy to work arm in arm with such a prestigious and dedicated group of Christian thinkers. Dr. R. Albert Mohler, president of Southern Seminary, offered numerous words of encouragement as this book took shape. His passion for theological dialogue and his intense commitment to the reform of the church in our day have spilled over into this volume, as he has

urged me along to get this material before the reading public.

The issues raised in this book have been with me in one way or another almost as long as I can remember. The pastor who has been my mentor for over thirty years, Thomas E. Pratt, Jr., challenged me early on to examine Scripture and then to evaluate local church life and the broader denominational context in light of the clear mandates of the text. I owe to him my conviction that the doctrine and practice of "church" must be framed first by the Bible and not primarily by pragmatics or tradition. I also *caught* from Tom something of what it means to be a passionate preacher of the Word of God and a pastor to the congregation. I can never repay my debt to him, though I can offer this inadequate word of public recognition and gratitude. My college New Testament professor, Alexander Strauch, was in the early stages of his own research on church governance when I took courses under him in 1975–76. He subsequently authored several books on the subject of church polity, including the acclaimed *Biblical Eldership.* Though I disagree with Alex on some key issues, his teaching did help stimulate me to reflect on these matters and to reexamine my own tradition in light of what were to me new arguments. I am pretty happy with my own tradition in the afterglow of all of that, but my understanding has been broadened by my interaction with him.

In seminary, Dr. Thomas J. Nettles helped guide me through the complexities of ecclesiology in the Free Church tradition. He also challenged me to explore the relative importance that questions of ecclesiology (and ecclesio-praxis) hold in theological formation. Dr. James Leo Garrett, Jr., my doctoral advisor, by his many writings and intense presence in classroom and personal dialogue (and his ruthless attention to detail in marking papers), constantly prodded me to see how ecclesiological matters relate to almost every sphere of theology and of the Christian experience. If I do not agree with him on every single point of the doctrine of the church, it is not because he has not challenged me to think about it!

When all is said and done, the pride of position in the early formation of my ecclesiology goes to two people who have neither ordination papers nor academic degrees. My parents, Edd and Nancy Brand, taught me the doctrine of the church by taking me to church and by encouraging me to live the life of a faithful member of Christ's body from the time that I was very young. My father held various important positions in the little church where we were members in north Denver, and my mother, a godly, Scofield-Bible-reading Sunday school teacher, drilled Scripture into me at a young age. They even made me go to church business meetings. (Talk about not being youth-seeker-oriented!) It was

probably in those meetings, dull and contentious (not necessarily at the same time) though they sometimes were, that I first began to develop an interest in just what was going on there. There is a real sense in which I am who I am because of Edd and Nancy Brand. My life as a theologian and churchman owes a monumental debt of gratitude to these two people, and it is to them that I affectionately dedicate this volume.

This work is as much the fruit of our families as it is of our strength and abilities. I (Stan) could not have completed this volume without the support and encouragement of my wife, Joy. She has been and remains a constant and profound source of encouragement and strength. I will always be indebted to her for her love and willing sacrifices. Her commitment to God and to me, as well as the strength of her character, allows me to pursue what I believe to be the will of God in my numerous writing ventures. I also want to express my appreciation for my three sons, Andrew, Daniel, and Stephen. Their understanding and patience for those times when Dad “had to study and write” are the kind of sacrifices that hopefully will benefit the kingdom. Bob and Janice Akin, my parents-in-law, also merit recognition. Their gentle spirits and quiet strength reside within the heart of their daughter. I hope that my family can continue their godly testimony of service and love. Bob Akin, my father-in-law, went home to be with the Lord in the midst of this project. I pray this work commemorates his devotion for the Lord's church.

The people to whom I am most indebted are those persons who were so influential in shaping my love for God and my passion for his church. My father and mother, Bob and Peggy Norman, deserve most of the credit for my contribution to this project. This book is the fruit of their patient, gracious, and loving parenting. Their commitment to God all but guaranteed that I would both see and hear the gospel of our Lord. They made significant sacrifices to ensure that I was involved in church most of my life. Their encouragement and support during my years of ministerial and theological training were often God's primary, if not his only, means of providing for my family. Although I could never repay the immeasurable debt that I owe to them, I lovingly and gratefully dedicate this volume to my parents.

My love for “church things” was instilled within me by two mentors. As was the case with Chad, I (Stan) also am indebted to the investment that Dr. James Leo Garrett, Jr. made in my life. He has graciously and willingly been an advisor, mentor, and friend. When I was a student, Dr. Garrett taught me to think critically, historically, and theologically. As my mentor, he instilled within me a deep love for my denomination (Southern Baptist). As my friend, he modeled for

me what it means to be a Southern Baptist and a Christian gentleman. The Rev. Robert D. Griffin was and will always be “my pastor.” He ministered to me in the multitude of ways that pastors do. I am grateful for his counsel and assistance as I struggled for several years with God's call to ministry. His loving patience with a young high school student guided me to the path on which I now walk. I fell in love with the church and its ministries as I witnessed the mercy and compassion of God radiate through Robert's life in local church ministry. I pray that I may faithfully entrust to others that which has been given to me by these two faithful servants of God.

Several persons who serve with me at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary also deserve special recognition. Thanks must be expressed to my dear colleague, Dr. Joel B. Sherrer. He is the kind of friend everyone should have. His encouragement and accountability often motivated me on these projects when my resolve began to waver. Dr. Robert B. Stewart and Dr. Ken Keathley are two wonderful colleagues whose friendship I also deeply cherish. Our interactions and dialogues hopefully make me a better teacher, author, and theologian. I also want to express my appreciation and gratitude to my president, Dr. Charles S. Kelley, and to my provost, Dr. Steve W. Lemke. Their direction and counsel for my various writing and professional ventures are invaluable. I could not research and write without their support and encouragement. Bart D. Box serves as my fellow, secretary, and grader. His assistance to me in my various writing endeavors is most helpful. I consider it one of God's great blessings to serve with men such as these.

Both of us would also like to give special acknowledgement to Leonard Goss of Broadman & Holman Publishers. He has been a remarkably wise and careful editor of this volume. This book would never have seen the light of day had he not affirmed both of us in our vision for the project. He has been a steady, sure guide along the way.

We wish to thank Jason Sampler, a Ph.D. student at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, for compiling the name and Scripture indexes; and Jeremiah Russell, a Ph.D. student at Baylor University's J. M. Dawson Institute for the Study of Church and State, for compiling the subject index.

INTRODUCTION

Is Polity That Important?

One of the issues that I (Stan) address in my introductory systematic theology courses is theological method. Part of my approach is to teach my students to analyze the manner in which we as Christians assign doctrines their level of importance. That is, what makes this particular belief more or less important than another?

Following the insights of other theologians, I have adopted a threefold scheme for the categorization of valid doctrines.[1] These categories are: “dogma,” “doctrine,” and “belief.” The category “dogma” encompasses those tenets that make us “Christian.” “Dogma” consists of concepts that are absolutely nonnegotiable for the Christian faith. To deny a tenet within the “dogma” category would be to deny a tenet of orthodox Christianity. Students typically and rightfully place such concepts as the Trinity and the person and work of Jesus Christ in this grouping. The second category, “doctrine,” includes those concepts that shape our understanding of the nature and ministry of the church. Differences of understanding for concepts within this classification would not necessarily constitute a denial of the Christian faith, but differing perspectives on concepts within “doctrine” would determine differences in denominational identity, nature of ministry, and such. My students (primarily Southern Baptists) typically place beliefs such as a regenerate church membership, believer's baptism, or a memorial view of the Lord's Supper in this category. The final category, “belief,” encompasses those ideas that are important but can be matters of difference of opinion. Concepts within the “belief” category are matters on which Christians can “agree to disagree” without disruption or breach of fellowship. Differences of theological understanding for tenets within the “belief” grouping neither constitute a denial of the Christian faith nor separation into differing denominations or churches. Students often place within this third category eschatological concepts such as the sequence of events and the timing of the second coming of Christ.

The previous examples of categorization are relatively easy for most introductory-level theology students. Some theological concepts, however, pose

more of a challenge for categorization. Among the more debated beliefs among my students is church polity. Some students say that the manner in which a church functions and organizes itself is a matter of opinion; thus, polity should be relegated to the category of "belief." Other students are more adamant that church polity should be classified within the second category of "doctrine" (no student ever argues that polity should be categorized as "dogma").

In a real sense, the exercise of doctrinal categorization reveals the questions at the heart of this book. What is church polity, and how important is it? Are discussions of polity really that necessary? In great measure, the manner in which one defines church polity will typically shape the level of importance and necessity attached to this doctrine.

If church polity is important (and all the contributors to this volume believe such, although they disagree about the level of importance), then what exactly is this concept? Each contributor will define his particular understanding of polity in his essay. For introductory purposes, however, polity can generally be defined as "the organization or governmental structure of a local church or fellowship of churches,"[2] or as "a form of church government adopted by an ecclesiastical body."[3] As these two definitions illustrate, most general understandings of polity involve governance and organization. In other words, church polity is typically conceived as the way in which a local church or a group of churches organize and administrate themselves.

Polity as the Organization of the Church

The early church in the Book of Acts provides ample evidence for understanding polity as organization. Early disciples kept a record of the number of their members (2:41; 4:4); they gathered together at set times and places for public worship and prayer meetings (2:42, 47), and they practiced the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper (2:41–42, 46). The "breaking of bread" seemed to follow some organized pattern (2:42). They shared property (2:45; 4:32–37) and received and accounted offerings (4:32, 36–37; 5:1–11). They even enlisted and organized deacons for the care of the poor and neglected widows among them (6:1–7).[4]

The meetings of the early church also reflect organization. Believers were commanded to meet together regularly (Heb. 10:25). The disciples set aside the first day of the week for this purpose, a practice that began almost immediately after the resurrection of Christ (John 20:19, 26). Paul instructed the Corinthian

believers to receive an offering on the first day of the week (1 Cor. 16:2), and he ministered to the believers at Troas “on the first day of the week,” when the believers had gathered together “to break bread” (Acts 20:7).

Organization within the early church is also evident in the concern for orderliness in all aspects of church life. Paul instructed the Corinthians that all things in the church were to be done “properly and in an orderly manner” (1 Cor. 14:40 NASB), suggesting that all activities of the church were to be conducted with symmetry and arrangement. The orderliness prescribed is that which results from discipline and structure. Thus, Paul commands orderliness from Christ's followers (Col. 2:5) and rebukes lack of discipline and structure (1 Thess. 5:14; 2 Thess. 3:6–7).[5]

Ecclesiastic organization can be found in other practices of the New Testament church. Letters of recommendation were often sent from one church to another in which the letter bearer was commended to the church of destination (Acts 18:24–28; 2 Cor. 3:1; Philem. 9–12). Ordered processes for the giving and receiving of such letters surely were followed. Collections were often solicited and sent from one church to another in the name of the giving church (Rom. 15:24; 1 Cor. 16:1–2; 2 Cor. 8:6–9:5). Official lists were kept of those who needed care or assistance from the church (1 Tim. 5:9). Certain customs or observances seem to evidence uniform patterns of practice and organization (1 Cor. 11:16).

Polity today, as well as in New Testament churches, is in part the organization of a group of believers in definitive, prescribed patterns. Ecclesiastic organization ideally brings symmetry, harmony, and discipline within the membership of the church. Further, this organization also defines the corporate relationship of Christians to those persons outside the membership of the church.

Polity as the Governance of Christ

The organizational conformity of a group of believers to certain structural patterns reflects the belief that Christians should submit themselves in distinct, prescribed ways to the will of Christ. As will be seen in the essays that follow, convictions differ not only on the nature of the structure of the organization but also on the specificity of the explicit will of Christ on this subject. Nevertheless, all major forms of church polity posit in some form the notion that the rule of Christ should be manifested through the organizational structure of a church.

The issue of governance is most visibly seen in the lordship of Christ. The church exists by and under his lordship. He builds the church and calls it “my church” (Matt. 16:18). Christ claims all authority for himself, both in “heaven and on earth” (Matt. 28:18), and he commissions the church to make disciples in all the world in light of his authority (Matt. 28:19–20). Further, Christ instructs the church that its task is to observe all that he has instructed. His lordship is further evidenced in that he appoints those who are to minister within the church and gives gifts for ministry to the church (Eph. 4:7, 11; 1 Cor. 12:5–6).

The governance of the church is also manifested in the quest of believers to conform their ministries and relationships to the teachings of the Bible. The will of Christ as Lord is expressed in the inspired Scriptures. Before leaving his disciples, Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit, who would act in his behalf to convey his will to them (John 16:12–14). The written Word of God is thus the very word of the resurrected Christ. As such, Jesus provides instruction and direction directly to his church through the inspired, apostolic witness. Christ thus directly and clearly through the Spirit's illuminating work manifests his lordship as he speaks to his church through Scripture. Polity, it is argued, becomes one means of implementing the governance of Christ's lordship within a body of believers.

Polity thus becomes a means of manifesting the lordship of Christ within his people. As the church functions and ministers in Christ's name, it attempts to do so in submission to his presence (vis-à-vis the Holy Spirit) and his written Word. The structure of its ministries, the nature and function of its officers, and the relationships of its membership both within and without the fellowship are considered expressions of Christ's governance over and among his people. As the church corporately submits herself to the lordship of Christ, the process, expression, and structure of her submission can be designated church polity.

The Shaping Influence of Polity upon the Church

Church polity is thus the manner in which a church or denomination practices organization and governance. Because these two principles permeate all areas of church life, polity has profound implications for understanding the nature of the church and its various functions and ministries. I (Stan) will attempt to demonstrate generally how this vital doctrine impacts the many facets of church life.

Polity and the Offices of the Church

One area in which we see the influence of polity is in the offices of a New Testament church. The contributors to this volume have differing perspectives on the number and purpose of the offices of the church. Nevertheless, all would agree, and do in fact discuss, that a particular view of polity shapes one's understanding of the offices (the converse of this is equally true; that is, a particular view of the offices of the church leads to a particular view of church polity). In any case, an interconnectivity exists between the offices and church polity.[6]

The manner of selection and function of those who occupy and serve in the offices of the church is intimately tied to this doctrine.[7] For example, those traditions that believe in the governance of the church through bishops also believe that the right to consecrate other bishops and ordain other ministers is a prerogative belonging only to the office of the bishop. As such, bishops select their own successors and exert rulership over the other offices and the laity. Other denominations exert governance through representative entities known as presbyteries, which consist of elders. These elders represent the church in matters of governance and organization and exert rulership over the churches or other religious entities under their authority.

Whereas in the previous tradition the bishops select those who occupy the offices, those in Presbyterian denominations generally select their elders in one of two ways; “teaching elders” are generally ordained by other ministers and “ruling elders” are normally ordained by the local congregation. This tradition exhibits an organization and authority shared between representative entities and local churches. Other groups believe that religious authority resides within a local congregation, not in bishops or presbyteries. The authority to select those who serve within the offices of those churches rests with each local church. Ministers in this tradition do not have any authority over other congregations or other ministers; all matters of governance and authority inhere within the local congregation. Ordination of ministers in this tradition is thus the prerogative and responsibility of each local congregation.

The issue of the nature and meaning of ordination is also shaped by church polity. For those groups that have more of a hierarchical structure in their polity, those selected for ordination are determined by those within the ministerial hierarchy (i.e., bishops). These candidates, upon their ordination, are invested with an ecclesiastical authority that they can exercise over the churches under their oversight. Those groups with more representative structures, as already

noted, may have ordination determined by a local church or by those who comprise an ecclesiastical body. Within a congregational model, churches call for the ordination of their candidates. Those ordained within this tradition do not receive and are not given authority over a congregation or congregations; rather, ordination is perceived more as an affirmation of calling and consecration unto service. In each of these models, the polity of each tradition plays a significant part in the determination of the meaning and significance of ordination for those serving in a church office.

Polity also influences the relationship of the clergy to the laity. Hierarchical-polity structures are such that the clergy exert religious organization and governance over the laity. In elder-led structures, elders and/or representative bodies comprised of elders exercise governance and organization in behalf of and over their churches. In congregational models, both clergy and laity ideally share in all governance and organization matters. Thus, in some polity models, governance and authority reside with the clergy and are exercised over the laity. In other models, religious authority resides with the congregation and is equally shared among clergy and laity. In the majority of cases, polity structures both reflect and determine how clergy and laity relate together within church life.

Polity and Church Membership

Another issue intimately intertwined with the doctrine of polity is church membership. In particular, the process of attaining membership in a church is directly affected by the particular polity beliefs of that church. For example, most churches require the candidate for membership to fulfill certain criteria or to complete certain rituals for membership. In some cases, these events are performed and supervised by the clergy of the church, reflecting the belief that the oversight and validation of the membership process resides with the bishop, elder body, or pastor. In other traditions, membership not only requires the completion of certain membership rituals, but candidates for membership must also receive approval by the congregation in some official public action. This is most certainly the case if a person initially becomes a Christian and desires to join a local fellowship of believers. In addition, whenever believers change their denominational affiliation, they may be required to submit themselves to certain membership requirements, depending upon the membership requirements and beliefs of their new denominational identity.

Polity not only affects becoming a member of a congregation, but it also affects the manner in which a church member transfers his or her participation

from one congregation to another. This process is determined in great measure by the denominational and polity practices of differing Christian groups. Recently, in the area where I (Stan) live, a local Roman Catholic congregation within the parish experienced significant numerical growth. In fact, the increase was so substantial that the physical plant could not accommodate the demands of the parishioners. Church officials (bishops) determined that another church was needed; so, they raised the funds, built a new building, and assigned membership at the new place of worship based upon geography (I recognize that this type of assigning members may not be universally practiced; yet this practice is the pattern in which the Roman Catholic church determines membership in their local parishes in this particular area of the country). In other traditions, the congregation may determine membership transferals.

For example, in the Southern Baptist tradition, whenever church members decide to change their church membership, they ask their new church to petition their former church for a letter of recommendation. The former church may or may not, for whatever reason, grant the request. Further, the new congregation may or may not accept the request for church membership. In both cases, the congregation generally and ultimately decides membership issues. In most scenarios, the process and completion of church membership, the validation and acceptance into membership, and the transferal or change in membership status generally reflect the polity beliefs of the denomination and/or the local church.

Polity and Church Discipline

Church polity also affects the disciplinary practice of a church or denomination. The New Testament provides several teachings and examples of the practice. Those persons typically subjected to disciplinary procedures were those individuals or groups who in some way hurt the people of God or who subjected the church to public embarrassment or ridicule. In either case, the overall concern of the New Testament appears to be with those who engage in behaviors or attitudes that have a harmful, injurious effect upon the entire congregation in one way or another.

Categories of offenses mentioned in Scripture vary in nature and kind, but they generally include those that in some way are publicly detrimental to the ministry and witness of the church in the world. Certain types of relationship issues are subject to disciplinary actions. These include difficulties between members (Matt. 18:15–17; 1 Cor. 5:5–6), disorderly conduct (2 Thess. 3:6–15), divisiveness (Rom. 16:17–18; Titus 3:9–10), and scandalous sins (1 Cor. 5:1–13). Deviant sexual behavior is also subject to disciplinary actions. Along with

sexual immorality, Paul also includes covetousness, idolatry, abusive speech, drunkenness, and swindling as sins meriting corrective action (1 Cor. 5:11). False teaching is also cause for church discipline (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17–18).

All orthodox Christian denominations formally recognize that church discipline is given by Christ to his church. The ultimate goal of the practice is the health and welfare of the body. The distinctions that exist in the practice and procedures of discipline stem from the differences of perspective regarding polity. Although aspects of the practice vary from church to church, overall polity determines how church discipline is practiced.

The polity beliefs of a church or denomination therefore determine the procedure for discipline. Those churches where governance resides with bishops will implement processes in which the bishops exercise disciplinary actions. Should expulsion from membership need to occur, the bishops will make the final determination. For those churches where governance resides with representative bodies, those entities will oversee and exercise the corrective measures. In traditions that practice congregational polity, the procedure for discipline resides ultimately with the congregation. If excommunication is required, each congregation makes the final decision for the removal of the offender. In like manner, restoration of the wayward person or group follows the same process; depending upon the polity structure, inclusion in the fellowship will be determined either by the bishops, representative bodies, or the entire congregation.

Polity and the Ministry of the Church

The importance of polity is further seen in the ministries of a church. In particular, issues of the organization and governance of church ministries are issues of polity. In denominations where organization and governance coalesce within the office of bishop, the responsibility and accountability for the ministries of the church or churches also rests with the bishop. Again, in those groups in which oversight resides with representative entities, the supervision of those ministries likewise resides with those same entities. In congregational polities, each local congregation assumes supervision of the ministries as an expression of the belief that the entire fellowship is responsible and accountable for its own ministries.

The relationship of polity with ministry can be taken a step further with regard to the participation and practice of ministry. I am well aware that most Christian denominations and churches have some belief that all Christians can

and should participate in ministry. All contributors to this work would no doubt affirm the importance and role of all members of a church sharing in ministry opportunities. Polity does, however, affect the level of expectation and participation. For example, churches that shape their polity in bishopric structures largely expect that the ministries of the church will to some degree not only be supervised by bishops but will also be executed primarily by those bishops.[8] In churches with congregational polity, all the members are expected to participate and practice in ministries.

Polity Is Important

I (Stan) hope that I have demonstrated the importance of this issue. Although not a tenet of orthodoxy within the Christian faith, polity does have profound implications for our understanding of the nature and purpose of the church, clergy-laity functions and relationships, and the ministry within and without the church. Because of the importance and necessity of this issue, church polity requires ongoing theological and practical dialogue not only among churches of like faith and order, but also among churches of differing denominational identities. Our own convictions on this matter are strengthened and enriched as we engage and reflect upon the traditions and practices of other believers.

Church Governance: A Historical Overview

As Stan has pointed out in the previous section, Christians do not all agree on just how churches are to be governed or structured. That is nothing new, as these differences date back to the earliest days of the church. In this section, I (Chad) will offer a brief overview of the major historical turning points in the development of the church's attempts to explain and incorporate the right polity or governance.

In the New Testament, *presbyter* and *overseer* appear to be words used to refer to the same office or role. In his address to the Ephesian church leadership, Paul calls them both presbyters (elders) and overseers (Acts 20:17–35). From the context there is no warrant to surmise that these were two distinct groups, and every reason to conclude that the words are coterminous. Likewise, Peter singles out the leaders of the church to which he wrote his first letter, and addresses them as presbyters who exercise oversight (1 Pet. 5:1–5). Presbyters *are*

overseers in the New Testament, it would appear. Or, to use the historic English translations of these Greek words, *elder* and *bishop* seem to be one and the same office.[9]

One does not have to look very far in today's church world, however, to discover that not all churches treat the office of elder and overseer as synonymous. Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican/Episcopal, Methodist, and many Lutheran fellowships, in one way or another, treat these offices as distinct, thus meriting the designation "Episcopal," since they emphasize a distinct role for the *episkopos.* There are even some surprises here. Casual observers might not expect that Holiness and Pentecostal denominations would actually be "Episcopal" in structure, but the Church of God (Anderson, Ind.) and the Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.) are both Episcopal bodies, though they do also share some Congregational features. Holiness and Pentecostal churches often see themselves as restorationist in some sense, and if organizations such as these share an Episcopal structure, one has to wonder whether, first, the evidence from the New Testament is as clear-cut as it seems on face value, or, second, if not, just how did Episcopal structures develop in the first place? Since we are leaving the construction of a biblical case on the various forms of polity to each author, we will defer the biblical argument to them. It might be helpful, however, to summarize the historical development of this discussion from the early church until now.

The Early Church

In the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, circa AD 95 to 150,[10] there is evidence of diverse practice among the early churches. Clement of Rome, writing in AD 95, seems not to make any distinction between bishops and elders,[11] but Ignatius of Antioch (ca. AD 107) does differentiate them. The bishops, he said, "preside after the likeness of God and the presbyters after the likeness of the Apostles, with the deacons."[12] The *Didache*, dated variously between AD 80 and 150, seems clearly to equate overseers and elders: "Appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons."[13] The fact that this is a manual on church order and that it does not differentiate between overseers and elders seems significant. These early witnesses to the order of the first churches paint a picture that is not exactly uniform in its portrayal of church governance. Ignatius describes a scenario in which there is a threefold order of leadership, with bishops at the top, deacons at the bottom, and presbyters in between, while the

Didache seems to point to only a two-tiered leadership structure—elders/overseers and deacons.

As the second century winds on, Ignatius's perspective becomes more and more the norm.[14] Irenaeus of Lyons, writing around AD 175–195, finds himself locked in theological combat with Gnosticism, one of the earliest heresies that confronted the church. One of the lynchpins in his polemic against the heretics was that God had appointed bishops in the church to succeed the apostles, and that just as the apostles gave authoritative instruction, so would the bishops in later generations.[15] This is one of the earliest arguments made for the notion of *apostolic succession.*

Here, the bishops serve not merely a pastoral role but the role of authoritative teachers whose instruction must be heeded by the churches (and presbyters) who are under their direction. By the year AD 200 there was an increasing tendency to view the church as an organizational hierarchy, with bishops at the top, presbyters in the middle, and the "laity" at the bottom. That is not to say that the monarchical episcopacy (bishops as rulers) was fully developed by this time. Indeed, one might argue that the bishops at this time were more like the conveners of presbyterial synods than as judges of final appeal.[16] It is nonetheless true that an elaborate system of church governance outside the local church was in process of development. Though there was an occasional reaction against this in the form of a focus on charismatic gifts rather than offices,[17] or on congregational rule,[18] the general tendency in the growing great tradition was moving toward a hierarchical episcopacy of some form.[19] Eventually this would involve differing levels of ordination or ministry, as one first becomes an ordinary minister and then advances to the level of bishop.[20]

Alongside this evolving structure there grew a similarly developing theology that linked salvation to the church and its ministries, especially the sacraments. Origen of Alexandria (d. 254) urged those who took the sacrament of bread not to drop a crumb to the ground, for that would be a great crime.[21] He further argued that the sacrament "sanctifies those who sincerely partake of it."[22] This comes very close to a position clearly espoused by medieval theologians, that the sacraments work *ex opere operato*, or in a virtual automatic fashion. The impact of the sacraments stems not from the faith of the participant but from the sacrament itself since it is given by the church.

Another North African theologian in the same century would draw several of these strands together. Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258) tied apostolic succession

to Matthew 16:18, where Jesus said to Peter, “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” Cyprian concluded, “Thence have come down to us in course of time and by due succession the ordained office of bishop and the constitution of the Church forasmuch as the Church is founded upon the bishops and every act of the Church is subject to these rulers.”[23] He went on to argue that Jesus had given to Peter the power of the keys, and that such authority had subsequently been passed on to successive generations of bishops. These keys both opened the door to heaven for those who were faithful and, alternatively, slammed the door shut against schismatics and heretics. But the authority of the keys rested in the hands of the bishops.

According to Cyprian, “there is one God and Christ is one and there is one chair [of the bishop] founded on the Rock by the word of the Lord,”[24] and this bishop is deputized by Christ to adjudicate doctrinal disputes.[25] No bishop is greater than any other, but all hold their positions in share with the others and so define the boundaries of the church.[26] In a fashion more direct even than Origen, Cyprian made the case that salvation is tied to one's relationship to the church. “There is no salvation outside the Church (*nulla salus extra ecclesiam*).”[27] Cyprian also observed, “He can no longer have God for his father who does not have the Church for his mother.”[28] Cyprian held that anyone who separates himself from the true church to join a sectarian movement has cut himself off from the possibility of salvation, in part because sectarian baptism is invalid, and in part because the sects do not have the keys.[29] There is a real sense in which these teachings provide a major clue in answering the question, How did the early church become what we know as Roman Catholicism?

Jerome (d. 420), the translator of the Vulgate, likewise held a very high view of the episcopal office. He recognized that in the early church the role of presbyter and bishop was one and the same, but he went on to assert that the rise of heresy meant that one presbyter had to take an authoritative role. “It was decreed in the whole Church that one of the presbyters should be chosen to preside over the others, and that the whole responsibility for the Church should devolve on him, so that the seeds of schism should be removed.”[30] Jerome also argued that the bishops were the “successors of the Apostles” who hold the keys to the kingdom.[31]

Augustine (d. 430) rounds out our examination of the early church. In some ways he affirms the previous “catholic” heritage, while in others he challenges and advances it. This African Father solidifies the church's affirmation of infant

baptism, arguing that unbaptized infants are in danger of “limbo” or even of hell. Yet that baptism does not guarantee salvation, for one must still believe the gospel when one comes to the “years of discretion.”[32] One's relationship to the church is a crucial element in salvation for Augustine, since the bishops are the heirs of the apostles. The church is one body and is in union with Christ, her head, and the relationship between Christ and his body is maintained by the Spirit, who brings them together in a relationship of love.[33]

Like Cyprian, Augustine believes that the bishops of the true church retain the keys to the kingdom. Unlike Cyprian, he holds that even Donatist baptism is genuine, though the Donatists are schismatics and in error.[34] The fact that they are schismatics means that, though their baptism is authentic, they are not linked to the true church in love, and so their baptism cannot be effective unto salvation unless they return to the true church.[35] Similarly, not all who are baptized even in the “catholic” heritage will be saved, for within the “visible church” (all of Christendom) there is an “invisible church” made up of the elect—these are the ones who will persevere unto salvation.[36] For Augustine, then, there is no salvation apart from the church and its bishops, but mere membership in the church and participation in its sacraments are not sufficient for salvation. One must have evangelical faith in Christ and genuine love for God, and one must persevere to the end.

Middle Ages and Reformation

Roman Catholicism and the Papacy

The most remarkable feature of church governance and polity in the Middle Ages is the dominance, especially in the Western church, of the papacy. Though the status of the bishop of Rome had been growing in prominence since the end of the second century, it was in the period between bishops Leo I (bishop of Rome AD 440–61) and Gregory I (590–604) that the papacy as we now know it first began to take shape. Leo became the hero of the Council of Chalcedon, reconciling competing factions and crafting much of the language of the creed or “symbol” which stamped that historic event.[37] Gregory “romanized” the church in England, and later popes did the same for Germany and Scandinavia. Gregory also reaffirmed that salvation was only possible through the “officers” of the true (i.e., Roman Catholic) Church, since that body alone possesses the keys to the kingdom.[38] “His pontificate and personality did much to establish the idea in

men's minds that the papacy was the supreme authority in the Church."[39] The ecclesiology of the Roman Church had now been firmly established.

The papacy would reach its point of highest influence and greatest power with popes Gregory VII (pope AD 1073–85), Urban II (1088–99), Innocent III (1198–1216), and Boniface VIII (1294– 1303). Gregory excommunicated the emperor (Henry IV), after which Henry pilgrimaged to the pope's palace in Canossa and knelt penitently outside in the snow for three days before Gregory came to the gate and offered him absolution.[40] Urban organized the first crusade and promised blessings from God on all who undertook the cause.[41] Innocent rivaled all of his predecessors by casting down one emperor and establishing another, by deposing the king of Germany, forcing his will on John of England, and causing Pedro II of Spain to capitulate and to cede all of his lands to the pope.[42]

Some of this seems almost criminal to us today, but for those who might wish to indict the popes for crimes committed, the Middle Ages had its own response: though one might think the pope to be wrong, "his error creates right."[43] Boniface articulated the highest papal claim to supremacy when he wrote, "It is altogether necessary for salvation that every human being be subject to the Roman pontiff."[44] It was also the case that many bishops and archbishops lived as lords and princes, affording a luxurious lifestyle by the annates, tithes, and other offerings coming from their churches.[45] All of this surely illustrates the great power that the bishops had come to achieve, however it may compare with the simple, biblical model of the "overseer."

Luther: An Address to the Episcopal "Problem"

In part, the Reformation was a reaction against these modifications of the role of the bishop in the church. In one of his early and seminal works, *Address to the German Nobility*, Martin Luther (d. 1546) asserted, "For whoever has come out of the waters of baptism can boast that he is already a consecrated priest, bishop and pope although it is not seemly that just anybody should exercise that office."[46] That does not mean, of course, that Luther abolished church offices. The Lutheran Augsburg Confession contends for the historic offices of the church and speaks of "our greatest desire to retain the order of the church and the various ranks within the church," the papacy of course being excepted.[47] In Luther's theology, each church was to call and confirm its own pastor.[48] German Lutheranism maintained the episcopal structure that had been

passed down from the historic Western Church, for Luther saw no need to "reform" that aspect of Catholic ecclesiology. Bishops in Luther's theology, however, did not have the right to supersede the authority of the local church nor to impose their will on congregational life.

Lutheranism's most significant polity innovations included the modification of the role of bishop, the rejection of a single ruling bishop (the pope), and the adoption of a model whereby the secular powers exercised authority over the church. In time, bishops would take on a somewhat more substantial role in determining doctrine and in church discipline for local churches, but most Lutheran groups remain essentially Congregational.[49] Clergymen were in effect civil servants, and so church and state were welded together in a manner quite different from that of the previous Holy Roman Empire. This fusion of church and state in Germany would last until 1919.[50] The bishops and pastors, then, governed the church, but the state governed the bishops.[51]

Zwingli and Calvin: Reforming Church Practice

In the Reformed churches on the Continent there was no one unified approach to polity. In Zurich, Ulrich Zwingli (d. 1531) found himself caught between two opposing concerns. On the one hand, he was firmly committed to rejecting episcopacy in any form.[52] Like Luther, Zwingli emphasized the priesthood of every Christian; unlike Luther, he was not willing to retain the traditional office of bishop in any way whatsoever. At the same time, Zwingli was forced to train his focus in another direction. In a manner similar to Luther, Zwingli had been able to carry out his reforms due to the endorsement of the magistracy. The town council demanded a voice in the reform process, and Zwingli was happy to comply. "In Zurich, perhaps more than in any of the other Reformed cities, church and civic community were one indivisible body, governed by the spiritual and secular officers who both accepted the principle of Scriptural authority as the basis for their joint governance."[53]

In 1524 some of Zwingli's students, Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz, denied the need for any political support for the changes being effected in the church and also sought to push the reform to more radical measures, affirming believer's baptism instead of infant baptism. The crisis came to a head early the following year, and Zwingli stood with the town council against the radicals, the Anabaptists, forcing them either to conform, to leave, or to be punished. The city of Zurich, then, had no formal episcopacy under Zwingli, who died in a war with the Catholic Forest Cantons in 1531. Yet the combined authority of church and

civic leadership set the parameters for what could be taught and practiced.

Zwingli's successor, Heinrich Bullinger (d. 1575), was not as implacably opposed to the idea of bishops. During the Marian Exile (1553–58), when hundreds of English pastors fled to the Continent from Mary Tudor's persecutorial reign, some of them landed in Zurich. Mary was succeeded by Elizabeth, who, though she returned the Church of England to the kind of self-determination and break with Rome inaugurated by Henry VIII, did not abolish the Episcopal form of government. Many of the exiles were doubtful about returning to such a structure, but Bullinger assured them that there was little reason for concern.[54]

John Calvin (d. 1564) held that the office of pastor was to be considered the ordinary office of the church in perpetuity, while the offices of apostle, prophet, and evangelist were for the early church alone.[55] He criticized the Western episcopacy because of its neglect of its primary duties and because it arose out of a faulty understanding of the Scriptures. In Geneva, Calvin organized the churches into a fourfold-ministry of pastors, elders, doctors (teachers), and deacons, though he tended to conflate the office of teacher with that of pastor.[56] The pastor of each church along with one or more of the elders served on a body known as the Consistory, a body which had the responsibility to establish a confession of faith and other tools for teaching and propagating the faith and which also served as the final court of church discipline in Geneva.[57]

Calvin argued, against episcopacy, that there is only one level of ordained ministry (the elder), not two (elder and bishop), and that there are two kinds of elders in the New Testament—teaching elders and ruling elders—a conviction that arose from his interpretation of 1 Timothy 5:17.[58] Since the elders of each congregation were chosen by the church and then sent on to serve in the Consistory, this model of governance was significantly different from earlier episcopal forms, though it did still provide for a certain amount of top-down authority. John Knox (d. 1572), one of Calvin's associates in Geneva and a Marian exile, would later introduce this model to like-minded ministers in Scotland, and in 1592, due largely to the efforts of Andrew Melville (d. 1622), the Kirk of Scotland became officially Presbyterian.[59]

Historically, two kinds of Presbyterianism have struggled for dominance. First are those Presbyterians who have held that church authority resides primarily in the synod or general assembly, that is, in the supracongregational body. The Scottish Presbyterians of the seventeenth century generally held to

this position and argued that the local congregations were to be subservient to those bodies.[60] Other Presbyterian and Reformed theologians, such as Louis Berkhof, have argued that the primary authority rests in the local session, and then is passed upward.[61] Robert Reymond, in his chapter in this volume, opts for a middle position between the two.[62]

Anglicanism: "Reforming" the Church from the Throne

Henry VIII's (d. 1547) "reform" of the Church of England had more to do with politics and his personal whims than it did with a genuine commitment to biblical, much less "Protestant," reforms.[63] When Anglicanism finally came into full swing under Queen Elizabeth I (queen from 1559 to 1603), it was a system which was both dominantly Episcopalian and Erastian. As an episcopal system, the Anglican Church had an elaborate system of bishops, who were required to take real authority over their own territories. As an Erastian system, it was a church under theauthority of the monarch.[64] The bishops ruled the church, but the monarch ruled the bishops; the bishops had the power of order, and the monarch had the power of jurisdiction.[65] "For the Reformers there was one Christian commonwealth, divided into clergy and laity, with the godly prince a sort of *tertium quid*, a sacred lay person."[66] This was especially true of the Church of England.

A challenge was issued to the Episcopal structure of the Anglican Church in 1570 by Cambridge theologian Thomas Cartwright, who held that Presbyterianism was the only biblical model and that it was of the essence of the church that it have the right kind of order. Richard Hooker replied that, though there is no "divine-right" form of church polity, "the first institution of bishops was from heaven, was even of God, the Holy Ghost was the author of it."[67] Cartwright was deposed from his chair at Cambridge, and Episcopacy triumphed. Other attempts were made in the seventeenth century to replace the Episcopal structure with a Presbyterial one, such as the convening of the Westminster Assembly (1643–49), but they would not prove successful. Except for a short period of time (1643–60) in which Parliament abolished Episcopacy, the original model would remain largely intact. The Anglican order today remains Episcopal, and the Church of England still holds to an outward appearance of Erastianism (there is still partnership but no essential dominance of state over church), though the Anglican orders scattered worldwide are obviously not subject to the monarch of England.

The Post-Reformation Church: Denominations and Diversity

Radical Reformers and Baptists: Rule by the Congregation

The Anabaptist stirrings in Zurich grew and flourished in spite of rejection and persecution from both Protestants and Catholics. One of the key leaders, Menno Simons (d. 1559), contended that the true church was “an intentional community consisting of regenerate members who willingly embraced a life of discipleship and who pledged themselves one to the other in conventional love and mutuality.”[68] The church, then, was to be a believers' church to whose membership only those who had made a conscious choice to repent and believe the gospel would be officially admitted. Only these persons were to be baptized, and so the baptism of infants was rejected out of hand. Since only conscientious believers were members of the church, the church and the state could not be coterminous. Therefore, the state should stay in its sphere, and the church should look after its own affairs.[69] Anabaptist churches held to a general equality of all Christians, though at the same time they did call pastors to their churches and in some situations even recognized the role of bishop.

In England a Separatist movement was lobbying for freedom to worship and organize churches after a pattern other than the state church. This movement met with great resistance from Elizabeth and her successors so that some fled to Holland, but over time the Separatists found more acceptance. Out of and alongside the Separatists a fledgling group of Baptist churches emerged in Holland, England, and the American colonies. These Baptists were essentially Separatists who had adopted a view of the church similar to the Anabaptists. Alongside their orthodox convictions about God, Christ, Scripture,[70] and salvation,[71] they contended for the idea of the believers' church, for believer's baptism, and for freedom of religious expression.[72]

The early Baptists articulated a polity that was “congregational” in nature. James Leo Garrett defines the intention of congregational polity to be one in which “the congregation govern[s] itself under the lordship of Jesus Christ (Christocracy) and with the leadership of the Holy Spirit (pneumatophoria), and with no superior or governing ecclesial bodies (autonomy) and with every member having a voice in its affairs and its decisions (democracy).”[73] Lutherans had earlier moved in a similar direction, but they still retained the office of

bishop as a supracongregational office; the Baptists did not.[74]

Two points of contention exist among Baptist Congregationalists. The first has to do with the question of cooperation. If Baptist churches are autonomous, does that not also mean that they must be completely independent from one another? Some have argued in the affirmative, believing that this represents a more biblical model.[75] Others have countered that there are sound biblical reasons churches of like faith and order ought to band together for mission and other causes.[76] The second disagreement has to do with the possibility of there being more than one kind of Congregational polity. Is it the case that only a purely democratic polity is Congregational, or might it be possible that Baptist churches with, say, plural elder leadership could also lay claim to the "Congregational" designation?[77] This is currently a highly debated issue.[78]

The Rise of Denominationalism

When the European powers began colonizing the Americas, they opened up doors to change that they surely did not anticipate. The English colonies of America became the hotbed for a new development—the rise of denominationalism. Now people could have any variety of Christianity they wanted as long as they moved to the right colony. When disestablishment began to worm its way into the colonies that still had state churches, even geographical location became no obstacle. Before the nineteenth century was over, even the European states had begun to abandon the notion of an exclusive state church.

New denominations arose, especially in America and England. In addition, a host of new versions of old-world churches would emerge in the new world, as immigrants often felt little need to remain linked to the parent denomination in Europe.[79] Methodism followed in the wake of the Wesleyan movement, and, in faithfulness to its Anglican parentage, Methodism adopted an Episcopal polity. One of the major differences between the two was that in Methodism, for the most part, the power of the bishop had been lessened.[80] In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Methodism itself spawned a host of new denominations, groups that broke away from the main body, complaining of doctrinal and ethical deterioration. Most of these "Holiness" bodies adopted an Episcopal structure as well, and when, a decade or two later, these churches were challenged by the rise of Pentecostalism, some of them split again, giving rise to Pentecostal Episcopal churches.[81]

The twentieth century witnessed an explosion of new church structures,

many of them affirming a Congregational methodology, perhaps due to the fact that this seemed more in keeping with the democratic spirit of America. “Bible churches” began to spring up, some of which were independent and Congregational, while others were more Presbyterial. Some Pentecostal denominations, such as the Assemblies of God, adopted hybrid polities, with some elements of the Congregational and some of either the Presbyterial or the Episcopal.[82] New Charismatic denominations such as Calvary Chapel and The Vineyard appear to be still in the process of working out just what kind of polity they will adopt. In addition, various parachurch organizations have arisen that might be seen as being in competition with the church and that generally have structures based on some form of corporate model. There is certainly no consensus on the matter of just how churches ought to be governed.

Conclusion

Where does that leave us? The answer might be, “In a blithering disarray of competing models, all of which lay claim to biblical authenticity, but which cannot all be correct.” One might be tempted at this point to say, “Maybe they are all right.” This calls to mind the scene in *Fiddler on the Roof* where a debate has broken out between the young radical Perchek and the rabbi's son. Perchek makes his point, to which Tevye, the main character in the story, replies, “You are right.” The rabbi's son then offers an opposing opinion, to which Tevye retorts, “You are right.” A man in the crowd then turns to Tevye and says, “‘He is right,’ and ‘he is right’?—they can't both be right!” Tevye's answer? “You know, you are also right!”

Tevye may have been the first postmodern Jew. But most of us in the evangelical community do not believe that everyone is right. It may be difficult to prove just who is wrong on the matter of governing the church, of course. But the criteria ought to be obvious—the scriptural witness seen in the light of the historic and contemporary interpretations of the church. That is what you, the reader, will find in these five essays offered from what may be considered as classic positions on the matter of governing the church. We (Stan and Chad) pray that these essays will drive you more and more to the Word of God to find answers to how the church ought to be led today, and we pray that God may use this book to further the reform and renewal of his church that it might truly be the instrument in his hand to lead the nations to Christ in the days ahead.

CHAPTER 1

The Single-Elder-Led Church

The Bible's Witness to a Congregational/Single-Elder-Led Polity

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DANIEL L. AKIN

Single-pastor Congregationalism is often a sight to behold. It is not necessarily a pretty one. A somewhat paranoid autocrat as pastor, monthly business meetings dedicated to senseless issues that only eat up time, a committee structure that looks like the Department of Education and is about as efficient, and a deacon board that functions like a carnal corporate board. My fellow contributors, I am sure, will be quick on the draw and point out how unbiblical such a model is. They are 100 percent right! It is unbiblical, but this is not what the Bible teaches about Congregational church government. What we discover in God's Word is altogether different.

A study of Scripture provides a number of snapshots of the early church doing church. A number of ecclesial patterns emerge, and specific commands appear periodically as well. Still, the New Testament does not provide a precise manual on how the structure of church government should be organized. Some would even agree with the skeptical judgment of Eduard Schweizer, who said, "There is no such thing as the New Testament church order."[1] I understand why some persons draw this conclusion, but I believe it to be unwarranted and unnecessary. While there is no precise manual on church government and polity, a survey and analysis of the biblical material reveals definite patterns and discernable guidelines on how the churches in the New Testament functioned.

In broad terms there are five forms of church government or polity: Episcopal (Roman Catholics, Anglicans/Episcopalians, Methodists), Presbyterian, Congregational (Baptists, Congregationalists, some Lutherans), Erastian (national state churches), and minimalist or nongovernmental (Quakers,

Plymouth Brethren).[2] Each of these systems would seem to have positive and even commendable features. Each seeks to highlight particular features found in Scripture. It is likely that in the early stages of the church's history, church government and polity were not highly developed. Local congregations were loosely knit groups. It is extremely probable that there were a variety of church governmental arrangements.[3] Each church would have organized itself, taking into consideration its own unique context and situation.

For instance, the apostles had the church in Jerusalem assist them in selecting candidates to serve the widows (Acts 6:3), whereas different circumstances required Paul to have Titus appoint elders on Crete (Titus 1:5). However, as we examine the Scriptures, the evidence leads us to the following position: New Testament churches were basically Congregational in their government and polity. The exact nature of this Congregationalism may have varied, but at its most basic and fundamental level churches were local bodies of baptized believers who operated within the parameters of Congregationalism. Further, there were two and only two offices within each congregation: pastors (elders or bishops) and deacons (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1–13). The Scriptures never specify the required or precise number of either. I am convinced, based on the evidence, that the number of elders or deacons is not the issue but that persons meeting scriptural qualifications is what is crucial. In the context of elders, *who* is giving leadership and direction to the church is far more important than *how many* are involved in this assignment.

It is my contention that the New Testament allows flexibility on this point. Both a single elder and a plurality of elders within a Congregational structure fit the pattern of church government and polity that emerges from a study of the New Testament. My assignment is to defend the single-elder view. I do believe, as I have stated, that it is an acceptable and biblically defensible position. I will make that defense in the latter part of this chapter. First, the evidence for Congregationalism will be examined. From there I will analyze the concept of elder. Following that, I will quickly survey relevant historical issues germane to Baptists and in particular the Southern Baptist Convention (the denomination in which I serve). I will then move to make a case for single elder, or better, senior pastor. I will conclude with insights from practical theology and several summary observations.

The Evidence for Congregationalism

Congregationalism locates the authority of the church in each local body of believers. No person or organization is above or over it except the Lord Jesus Christ alone as its head. Saucy summarizes well how this works itself out as each local church conducts its affairs:

> Emphasis is upon the democratic structure of the church whereby the ultimate authority is vested in the members themselves. This does not preclude ministers elected in recognition of their divine gifts to serve as leaders, but their authority rests in their relation to the congregation and is generally less extensive in practice than either the Episcopal or Presbyterian ministers. In the ultimate sense, officers have no more ecclesiastical authority than any other member. Each has but one vote on any issue.[4]

Each and every member has equal rights and responsibilities. However, aspects of representative democracy are not ruled out. Certain persons may indeed be chosen by the body of believers to lead and serve in particular and specific ways. Those who are called to pastor the church immediately come to mind. Striking a delicate but discernable balance, leaders in a local congregation are answerable ultimately to God (Heb. 13:17; James 3:1; 1 Pet. 5:2–4), but they are also responsible to those who have chosen them. Because all believers comprise the priesthood of the New Testament church, no particular group or individual may be interposed between any child of God and the heavenly Father. There is only one mediator between God and mankind, and that mediator is Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5). The humblest believer has direct access to God (Heb. 10:19–22). This equal standing before God would point toward a Congregational form of government. However, this can be abused where the practice of church discipline is absent. The result can be ecclesiastical anarchy and great harm can come to the health, fellowship, and witness of the church.

The Biblical Data

It is my intention to simply walk through the canon of New Testament Scripture as it has been passed down to us and see what picture naturally emerges concerning the operations of first-century churches. We will not tarry at any particular location any longer than is necessary to see what is said about the way the church worked and handled its business.

Matthew 18:15–17

This is the only text in all of the Gospels to use the word “church”

(*ekklesia*). MacArthur is no doubt correct when he states, “Used in a nontechnical sense in Matthew, *ekklesia* does not specifically refer to the church born at Pentecost, but it certainly anticipates the New Testament church that comes about by the baptism of the Spirit of God in Acts 2. Its immediate application was to the assembly of the disciples who were gathered in the house at Capernaum, but it gives a principle that goes beyond that small assembly and embraces the whole church.”[5]

The issue is how the believing community is to deal with a sinning brother or sister. The text is straightforward, with the pattern followed being rooted in Deuteronomy 17:6 and 19:15. It is also consistent with other practices of the day.[6] Matthew records Jesus as saying, “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that *‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’* And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector” (Matt. 18:15–17 NKJV, emphasis added).

The clear meaning of the text is that the final court of appeal in the exercise of church discipline is the church and “that each member of the church is to abide by the *corporate judgment*” (emphasis added).[7] Mark Dever gets to the heart of the issue when he writes, “Notice to whom one finally appeals in such situations. What court has the final word? It is not a bishop, a pope, or a presbytery; it is not an assembly, a synod, a convention, or a conference. It is not even a pastor or a board of elders, a board of deacons or a church committee. It is, quite simply, the church—that is, the assembly of those individual believers who are the church.”[8]

Acts 6:1–7

Early in its history the church was confronted with a problem related to the work of the ministry. The issue was *how* daily distributions for widows should take place and *who* would be responsible to see that the task was properly accomplished. The fact that the apostles themselves were involved in the way the decision was reached makes what we find all the more remarkable. Verses 2–3 say that the Twelve summoned the multitude of disciples and urged them to “seek out from among you seven men of good reputation...whom we may appoint over this business” (NKJV). Verse 5 reveals that “the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen.” They (the whole multitude) then

brought these men before the apostles who "when they had prayed, they laid hands on them" (Acts 6:6 NKJV).

It is not necessary for our discussion to make a decision on whether this is when the office of deacon was instituted. What is important to see is the congregational involvement, initiated by the apostles, in seeking out these men from among themselves to serve. The whole congregation had the responsibility of identifying men who were spiritually qualified for the task of daily distributions to Hebrew and Hellenistic widows. It is instructive to note that they brought these men before the apostles for their commissioning and, apparently, approval. This is a wise strategy that balances congregational participation with pastoral leadership. F. F. Bruce, no Congregationalist, accurately notes, "It was the community as a whole that selected these seven men and presented them to the apostles for their approbation; it was the apostles who appointed them to their office."[9] John Stott adds, "The Twelve did not impose a solution on the church, however, but gathered all the disciples together in order to share the problem with them."[10] In this incident we discover the wisdom of strong pastoral leadership and appropriate congregational involvement. Even the apostles recognized that it was proper to involve the congregation in vital decision-making that would affect the life and ministry of the church.

Acts 11:22

The church at Antioch was predominantly a Gentile congregation. It was also the first and most prominent missionary-sending fellowship in the early days of the church. When the gospel came to Antioch, Jerusalem wanted to help and encourage the work there. Verse 22 informs us that *the church* in Jerusalem "sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch" (NKJV). He was not sent by the apostles or the elders only. The clear indication is that the congregation as a whole sent him.

Acts 14:27

Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch following the first missionary journey (Acts 13:1–14:28). Upon their return the text says, "Now when they had come and gathered *the church* together, they reported all that God had done" (NKJV, emphasis added). Their report was evidently not to the leadership only but to the entire congregation.[11]

Acts 15

This passage records the crucial meeting of the Jerusalem conference that convened to determine the status of Gentiles in the church and issues related to salvation and the keeping of the Law. This text is crucial at a number of points in terms of ecclesiology. Issues of local church autonomy, voluntary cooperation between churches, and church polity all come to light. First, it was the local church at Antioch that sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem (Acts 15:2–3), and it was the local church at Jerusalem that received them along with the apostles and elders (Acts 15:4). Second, the decision by the church at Antioch that sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem to confer with the apostles and elders about the "Gentile question" arose from that church's voluntary initiative. This important problem started from the bottom and moved up. It was not a top-down decision.

Third, though the apostles and elders appropriately convened and led the discussion, "all the multitude...listened" (Acts 15:12, NKJV) to the debate. Fourth, verse 22 points out that "it pleased the apostles, and elders, *with the whole church*, to send chosen men of their own company" (NKJV, emphasis added) to deliver Paul and Barnabas with the decision reached by the conference at Jerusalem. Fifth, the letter that was sent came from "the apostles, the elders, and the brethren,"[12] and it was directed to "the brethren" (the church as a whole) at Antioch (Acts 15:23). Sixth, it was the church as a whole that received the letter (Acts 15:30) and rejoiced over its content (Acts 15:31). In all that took place congregational involvement and action are present at every turn.

Saucy summarizes the entire event quite well: "In all of these important actions there is no hierarchy which rules by its own authority."[13] The Scriptures are quite consistent on this. Further, there is no command to form interchurch unions of any type. There is no instance of control over a local body of believers by any outside organization or individuals. The apostles and their representatives (e.g., Titus) appointed elders for new church starts, gave their judgment, made recommendations and provided advice, but they did not exercise rulership or control.

1 Corinthians 5

The issue is again church discipline (cf. Matt. 18:15–17). A case of sexual immorality had gone unchecked, and Paul was scandalized by the lax behavior and indifferent attitude of the church at Corinth. Paul addressed not the elders, but the congregation as a whole. In particular, he stated that appropriate discipline was to be exercised "when you are gathered together" (v. 4 NKJV). The issue of church discipline is a matter to be handled by the entire

congregation, not just those in leadership. “Indeed, he [Paul] is upset with the whole church—not just the leaders—that they haven't already taken action and had been tolerating such sin.”[14] Paul calls for nothing less than a “community action, carried out in the context of the Spirit.…The whole community must carry out the action because the ‘leaven’ has affected them as a community.”[15]

1 Corinthians 6

The issue here is one Christian suing another Christian in the civil courts. Paul is again outraged by such an action and rebukes the Corinthians in very strong terms. To whom should believers make appeal when situations of this nature arise? The answer is provided in verse 1—the saints. He does not say a presbytery, assembly, synod, board of elders, pastor, group of deacons, or a church committee. This is again an issue that is the responsibility of the entire body. While the church may choose to delegate the responsibility to gifted and qualified persons to handle such matters (there is no inconsistency within Congregationalism in doing this), ultimately the adjudication of the issue rests on the doorstep of the local congregation as a whole. Therefore Paul puts the issue before the body of believers as a whole.

1 Corinthians 7–12

The church at Corinth had a number of questions concerning which they needed Paul's counsel (usually introduced by the phrase, “now concerning…”; 7:1, 25; 8:1, 4; 12:1; 16:1, 12). Regardless of who actually penned the letter, the letter was received by Paul as coming from the church as a whole. It was not said to have come from the leadership. It was sent by the entire body of believers residing in Corinth. In each of his responses he directs his answer to the whole body of believers.

1 Corinthians 16

Paul is engaged in taking a collection for the church in Jerusalem. He had previously given directions to the churches of Galatia. Now he gives instructions to the church at Corinth. The congregation, as a body of believers, is told what they should do.[16] Further, to ensure proper accountability and integrity, the church (not the pastor or elders or deacons) is to approve those who will go to Jerusalem with their gift (16:3–4).

2 Corinthians 2

The issue again is church discipline. It is perhaps the case, though this is not certain, that Paul is addressing the same situation previously discussed in 1 Corinthians 5. Verse 6 is incredibly important for our study. Here Paul says that in this matter of church discipline, "This punishment which was inflicted *by the majority* is sufficient for such a man" (NKJV, emphasis added). Kruse notes that the text "suggests that the congregation had acted formally and judicially against the offender."[17] Garland adds, "Paul's concern about the punishment of the offender presents the picture that church members presided as judges over the person involved and pronounced a sentence."[18] It seems quite clear in this text that a church vote took place (a majority was established) and that the congregation as a local body of believers took part in the process. A Congregational polity undergirds the third distinctive mark of the church: the practice of church discipline.[19]

Theological Considerations

The biblical data, especially what we discover in Acts and the Pauline epistles, supports a Congregational understanding of church government and polity. To this we may add also several theological and historical issues that further the argument for Congregationalism. Here we will consider items such as: recipients of letters, responsibility for doctrinal integrity, cessation of the apostolic office, church order and unity, the priesthood of all believers, *sola scriptura*, and the witness of the *Didache*.

The Recipients of New Testament Epistles

The overwhelming majority of the New Testament letters were written to church congregations. In fact, not one letter is addressed to a bishop, elder, a group of elders, or the deacons.[20] Letters are sent to churches with the whole congregation in view. Because each member of the body is a believer-priest with rights and responsibilities, each is a recipient of the apostolic instruction contained in the letters. Even the Revelation, the last book of our New Testament, is expressedly addressed "to the seven churches which are in Asia" (Rev. 1:4 NKJV).

Responsibility for Doctrine and Practice

"The responsibility of maintaining true doctrine and practice is directed toward the entire church."[21] Now it is certainly the case that the leaders of the

church are especially responsible and accountable in this regard (Acts 20:28–32; 1 Thess. 5:12–13; 1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:1–2; 4:1–5; Titus 1:9; James 3:1; 1 Pet. 5:2); however, the calling to pursue doctrinal fidelity "is ultimately held in trust, under God, by the congregation."[22] First Corinthians 11:17–34 rebukes the church at Corinth as a whole for disgracing the Lord's Supper. Galatians 1:8–9 places the burden of maintaining the purity of the gospel in the hands of local churches. First Thessalonians 5:21 admonishes each believer to "test all things; hold fast what is good" (NKJV). First John 2:20, 27 speaks of the Spirit's anointing and the ability of every believer to understand the truth. First John 4:1 challenges each believer to "test the spirits whether they are of God."

And Jude, written "to those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ" (Jude 1 NKJV), calls on each one of us "to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3 NKJV). "The faith" was not delivered to pope or magisterium. It was not delivered to a synod or council. It was not delivered to a pastor, elders, deacons or any other select group or individual. "The faith" was delivered to all believers who are beautifully described as "called, sanctified, and preserved" in Jude 1. It is crucial to see that whenever the authors of Scripture combat false teaching, they write to the churches, because doctrinal integrity is a matter of congregational responsibility.

Cessation of the Apostolic Office

It is readily acknowledged by all that the apostles had a special and unique position of authority and leadership in the first-century churches. However, even the apostles, as we have seen, did not exercise absolute and unlimited authority. Carson analyzes the situation well and writes:

> Arguably, the strongest authoritative human voices in the earliest churches were the apostles (in the narrow sense of that flexible term, i.e., the Twelve [Matthias replacing Judas] plus Paul). Their authority extended beyond the local congregation, even beyond congregations they had been instrumental in founding (for how else could Peter's influence be felt in Corinth and Paul's in Colossae?), but it was not without limit. A Peter could prove inconsistent in practice (Gal. 2:11–14) and a Paul could be mistaken in judgment (Acts 15:37–40; cf. 2 Tim. 4:11). The objective truth of the gospel, Paul insists, enjoys an antecedent authority; if even an apostle tampers with that, he is to be reckoned anathema (Gal. 1:8–9).[23]

Adding to this, it is significant to note that there is no mention at all—not

even a single text—for the transference of the apostolic office. Once the apostles were dead, the office died with them. Historically, the doctrine of succession by ordination does not appear for some time after the New Testament church. Although Ignatius writes very early recognizing the episcopate, he has nothing to say about apostolic succession. The *Didache* upholds Congregational church government, instructing the local churches to appoint their own bishops and deacons (15:1). It says nothing about the succession or appointment of apostles. The absence of successors to the apostles is due to the uniqueness of their office; it could not be transmitted. Directly commissioned by Christ himself (Mark 3:14), the disciples were sent forth as his representatives with his authority (Matt. 10:40). Only Christ's apostles, the Twelve, met the necessary qualifications. They must bear direct witness to the resurrection (Acts 1:21–22) and receive their commission and teaching ultimately from him (1 Cor. 9:1; Gal. 1:1, 11–17). This could not be passed on.

Church Order and Unity

Because the church is a body, there is an interrelatedness that connects each member to the others. Every one's shoulders bear the load of congregational responsibility. The church at Corinth struggled with proper decorum in worship. Paul does not instruct the leadership but the entire congregation to “let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:39–40 NKJV). The church at Philippi had two wonderful women who had a personal conflict of some sort. The responsibility to help them work things out was given to the local body as a whole (Phil. 4:1–3).

The Priesthood of All Believers

Theologically, this is one of the more important defenses for Congregational polity. I know of no evangelical Protestant who denies the priesthood of believers. The issue is how this doctrine is to be understood and how it is related to other doctrinal issues such as church government and pastoral authority and leadership. Soul competency and religious liberty are also important theological considerations in this context. However, they must not be equated with the priesthood of all believers. Soul competency is grounded in the conviction that all persons have an inalienable right of direct access to God. Its truth applies to all persons without discrimination.

Soul competency is a natural component of being created in the image of God. However, the effects of the Fall have greatly injured mankind's ability to relate to God. Indeed, without his initiation, we will not seek him, and we will

suppress and pervert his revelation (cf. Rom. 1:18–3:20). We should follow Timothy George and "speak more accurately of 'soul incompetence.'" Soul competency affirms that every individual is responsible to God, and it serves as a motivation for us to share the gospel with everyone. George summarizes the doctrine well and then appropriately relates it to the doctrine of the priesthood of the believers:

> Soul competency pertains universally to all persons, not merely to Christians. Baptists, however, do not teach the "priesthood of all human beings." Priesthood applies only to those who, through repentance and faith, have been admitted into the covenant of grace and, consequently, have been made participants in the priestly ministry of their Mediator, Jesus Christ, i.e., to believers only.[24]

Religious liberty guarantees every congregation the right to order its own internal life, doctrine, and discipline, in accordance with its understanding of divine truth. No external entity may intrude or interfere with the internal governance and workings of this voluntary association. George is correct in what this entails when he notes:

> Practically, this means that heresy is always possible and that spiritual vigilance is a constant necessity. Thus, priesthood of believers does not mean, "I am a priest. I can believe anything I want to." It means rather, "As a priest in a covenanted community of believers, I must be alert to keep my congregation from departing from 'the faith once and for all delivered unto the saints' (Jude 3)."[25]

It is clear, therefore, that soul competency, religious liberty, and the priesthood of believers are interrelated but not identical theological tenets.

The priesthood of all believers was a major emphasis of the Reformation of the sixteenth century. It was recovered by the Reformers to strengthen "an evangelical understanding of the church over against the clericalism and sacerdotalism of medieval Catholicism. In modern theology, however, the ecclesial context of this Reformation principle has been almost totally eclipsed." The Reformers made a crucial distinction that is often missed. They did not speak of the "priesthood of the believer." "The reformers talked instead of the 'priesthood of all believers' (plural). For them it was never a question of a lonely, isolated seeker of truth but rather of a band of faithful believers united in a common confession as a local, visible *congregatio sanctorum*."[26] Althaus, a significant interpreter of Luther, clarifies the original Reformation meaning of the doctrine:

> Luther never understands the priesthood of all believers merely in the sense of the Christian's freedom to stand in a direct relationship to God without a human mediator. Rather he constantly emphasizes the Christian's evangelical authority to come before God on behalf of the brethren and also of the world. The universal priesthood expresses not religious individualism but its exact opposite, the reality of the congregation as a community.[27]

This attention to the doctrine's relationship to the congregation as a community is important for a Congregational understanding of church polity. The priesthood of all believers does not mean, “I am my own priest.” It means that in the community of saints, God has constructed his body such that we are all priests to one another. Priesthood of all believers has more to do with the believer's service than with an individual's position or status. We are all believer-priests. We all stand equally before God. Such standing does not negate specific giftedness or calling. It rather enhances our giftedness as each one of us individually and collectively does his part to build the body (Eph. 4:11–16). We all are priests. We are all responsible. This is totally consistent with Congregationalism, and this form of church government honors best this crucial scriptural teaching.

Sola Scriptura

This was also one of the battle cries of the Reformation. It is here that apostolic authority is properly located. Apostolic authority is communicated by the canonical writings of the apostles, which carry with them apostolic authority. The Bible as the Word of God was the believer's sole authority for faith and practice. It teaches him what to believe and how to live. God has graced the church with both men and women who possess the gift of teaching. They are invaluable to the well-being of the church, and their importance should never be minimized. Still, God has located ultimate and final authority in his infallible and inerrant Word (Matt. 5:17–18; John 10:35; 17:17; 2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Pet. 1:20–21).

Carson addresses this well when he writes, “Whereas Christians are encouraged to support and submit to spiritual leadership (e.g., Heb. 13:17), such encouragement must not be considered a blank check; churches are responsible for and have the authority to discipline false teachers and must recognize an antecedent commitment not to a pastor but to the truth of the gospel.”[28] No believer can supercede the Bible as the final court of decision. Gifted pastor-teachers (Eph. 4:11) and faithful elders “who labor in the Word and doctrine” (1

Tim. 5:17 NKJV) are essential, and they exercise the more necessary spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:28). However, responsibility to live under the lordship of Jesus Christ is directly related to *every* believer's obedience to the Word. The work of the Spirit in concert with the Word equips and qualifies the believer to judge and test all things. This responsibility is not limited to a special group within the church, not even the leadership.

Doctrinal accountability is the responsibility of all believers in the body of Christ as they submit themselves to the lordship of Christ under the authority of his Word. As Clowney notes, “Church authority, grounded in the Word of Christ, is also limited to it. Christian obedience to church rule is obedience in the Lord, for His Word governs the church.”[29]

The Didache

This document gives us insight concerning early practices of the postapostolic church. It does not carry the weight of Scripture, but it does show us something about church government at this early stage of church history. This ancient church document was discovered in Constantinople in AD 1875, the manuscript dating to 1056. It was probably known by Clement of Alexandria (c. 155–c. 220), and it was highly esteemed by the church historian Eusebius, who considered it almost canonical. It could be described as a “handbook of instruction in morals and church order.”[30] Many would date it at the end of the first or the beginning of the second century, though certainty is not possible. In section XV, instructions are given to the congregation concerning the election of its leadership. “Elect therefore for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men that are gentle and not covetous, true men and approved; for they minister to you the ministry of the prophets and teachers. Therefore despise them not; for these are they that are honored of you with the prophets and teachers.”[31]

Several observations can be noted from this short statement. First, only two offices are acknowledged for election: bishops and deacons. There is no third office. Second, it is the responsibility of the congregation to elect their officers. Bishops do not elect bishops, and deacons do not elect deacons. Third, the congregation is to honor those who meet the scriptural qualifications for spiritual leadership. This again strikes the beautiful balance between congregational participation and pastoral leadership reflected in the New Testament. The congregation has a voice in who leads them, but once these leaders are chosen, the members of the congregation are obligated to honor and follow them unless they (the leadership) are disqualified through immoral, unethical, or unscriptural

behavior.

Summation

Our survey of the biblical materials reveals a consistent, overarching pattern of Congregational church government and polity. In addition, we have examined several important theological propositions that also call for Congregationalism. This approach to governance honors the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*. It also recognizes that the primary recipient of New Testament epistles was the local congregation, and the fact that every believer is responsible for the doctrine and practice of the church. We have seen that there is no provision in Scripture for the continuation of the apostolic office and that interchurch activity and partnerships were voluntary.

The fact that Congregationalism undergirds the New Testament pattern of church government prevents churches past or present from being locked into some type of ecclesiastical straitjacket. It would seem that the Episcopal and Presbyterian forms of church government would be more susceptible to this danger. A type of representative Congregationalism is biblically defensible and in some instances, wisely warranted. Erickson, himself a Congregationalist, provides a reasonable perspective at this point.

> Two situations call for some qualification of our conclusion. (1) In a very large church many members may not have sufficient knowledge of the issues and candidates for office to make well-informed decisions, and large congregational meetings may be impractical. Here a greater use of the representative approach will probably be necessary. Even in this situation, however, the elected servants must be ever mindful that they are responsible to the whole body. (2) In a group of immature Christians where there is an absence of trained and competent lay leadership, a pastor may need to take more initiative than is ordinarily the case. But the pastor should also constantly work at instructing and building up the congregation so that they might become increasingly involved in the affairs of the church.[32]

There is nothing in the New Testament that would prevent variations of a Congregational model. Our survey seems to demonstrate that this is what happened. The point to emphasize is that some form of Congregationalism was practiced and that we find no other ecclesiastical pattern. New Testament churches were Congregational in their polity.

An Analysis of the Concept of Elder

The terms *elder* and *overseer* are used interchangeably in the New Testament.[33] This view is defined by numerous Church Fathers including Jerome, who states, “Indeed with the ancients these names were synonymous, one alluding to the office, the other to the age of the clergy.”[34]

Elders in the Old Testament

The term *elder* has its roots in the Old Testament and means “to be old” or “to grow old.” It could refer to an aged person or a leader in the community. The term appears more than 180 times in the Old Testament, but only about one-third of the uses refer to age, while the remaining two-thirds refer to a community leader. The establishment of “the elders” as a distinct group of leaders is not given in the Old Testament, but it is presupposed throughout. Elders ruled as a collective body, and the term is almost always found in the plural, except when it refers to age.[35] Campbell argues that the elders' authority was not based on appointment from above but was grounded in recognition from the people.[36] An elder was granted authority by the people of his community who deemed him worthy of respect and honor. Campbell writes, “It is not so much an office of individual leadership as a body of people from whom leaders would be likely to spring or be chosen, and with whose opinions any such leader must undoubtedly reckon.”[37] A man became an elder by means of his moral authority, integrity, and standing in the community.

In Numbers 11 God directs Moses to gather seventy of the elders of Israel in order to appoint them to share the burden of judging the people. It is instructive to note that the elders shared in the work with Moses but yet remained under him (e.g., 11:25). Numbers 11 would become the model for the Sanhedrin and later was used to justify rabbinical ordination.[38] In the Old Testament, elders had a variety of functions. First, the elders represent the entire people or a community in religious or political activity (Exod. 12:21; Lev. 4:5; 1 Sam. 8:4; 2 Sam. 5:3). Second, the elders are associated with the leader, or accompany him when he exercises his authority (Exod. 3:18). Third, the elders serve as a governing body (Ezra 5:5; 6:7, 14). Fourth, the elders sometimes serve as part of the royal council (2 Sam. 17:4, 15). Finally, the elders are a judicial body (Deut. 19:12; 21:3; 22:15).[39] Thus, the elders served as “national, political, and religious representatives and leaders.”[40] Campbell adds, “The functions

performed by the elders are accordingly deliberative, representative and judicial."[41]

Elders in the New Testament

The Greek term *presbuteros* and its cognates appear sixty-six times in the New Testament. Like the Old Testament term, it can refer to an old person (man or woman; e.g., John 8:9; Acts 2:17; 1 Tim. 5:1–2). It can be used in the comparative sense of one who is older than another (Luke 15:25). More commonly, the word denotes officials in both Judaism (members of the Sanhedrin or synagogue) and the church. In a few places it has the meaning of "forefathers" (Matt. 15:2; Mark 7:3, 5; Heb. 11:2). Similar to the Old Testament usage, we find various designations associated with elders: elders of the people (Matt. 21:23; 26:3, 47; 27:1; Luke 22:66), elders of the Jews (Luke 7:3; Acts 15:15), elders of Israel (Acts 4:8), and elders of the church (Acts 20:17; James 5:14). There were elders in the churches of Jerusalem (Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22–23; 16:4; 21:18), Galatia (Acts 14:23), Ephesus (Acts 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17, 19), Crete (Titus 1:5), Asia Minor (1 Pet. 5:1), and other Jewish Christian assemblies (James 5:14).

The first time "elders" is used in a specifically Christian context is in Acts 11:30, where the church at Antioch sends Barnabas and Paul to the elders in Jerusalem with money to aid in the famine relief crisis (11:27–30). It is interesting that the term appears without any explanation given by Luke. In Acts 14:23 (NKJV) Paul and Barnabas "appointed elders in every church" and in 20:17 Paul's farewell speech is given to the elders of Ephesus. Other references to "elders" occur in 1 Timothy 5:17, 19: Titus 1:5; Hebrews 11:2 ("forefathers"); James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1; 5:2; 2 John 1; 3 John 1, and twelve occurrences in the Book of Revelation.

The Origin of the Christian Elder

It is not easy to determine the precise relationship between Christian elders and the elders of the Old Testament, Sanhedrin, and synagogue. There are both similarities and differences. Certainly the patterns of the Old Testament and especially the synagogue exerted influence as this was the context and milieu from which the church emerged. Yet the differences are substantial enough to reject any direct correlation.[42] Synagogue elders were not formal officeholders but were officials of the community. Their authority was tied to their position in the community and only secondarily to the synagogue. It is important to note that the leaders in the Old Testament communities were called *presbuteroi* in the

Septuagint. It is likely that the church based its leadership model more on the Old Testament, which it wholeheartedly embraced, rather than on the synagogue, the rejection of which was initially partial and eventually complete.

Overseers in the New Testament

The word *episkopos* occurs only five times in the New Testament. In Acts 20:28 Paul tells the Ephesian elders that the Holy Spirit has made them overseers and that they are to shepherd the church of God. Here the three crucial terms with respect to church leadership all appear. Emphasis is on function, not office.[43] Elders oversee and shepherd the flock. It is essential to note that the two terms *(elder* and *overseer)* are used interchangeably. In his salutation to the church at Philippi, Paul addresses all the saints, including the overseers and deacons (Phil. 1:1). In 1 Timothy 3:2–7 and Titus 1:7–9 we read of the qualifications for the overseer. First Peter 2:25 makes reference to Christ ("the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls," NKJV). The related term *episkope* occurs four times in the New Testament. Twice it refers to God's visitation in judgment (Luke 19:44; 1 Pet. 2:12) and twice it refers to officeholders (Acts 1:20; 1 Tim. 3:1). The verb form *episkopeo* is found twice (Heb. 12:15; 1 Pet. 5:2).

It is difficult to identify the precise origin of the term *episkopos.* It is used in a variety of contexts in the Septuagint. Some believe the term has its origin in Greek societies or clubs and still others in the *mebaqqer* of Qumran.[44] However, as with the concept of *presbuteros*, it is better to see an almost entirely new position when considering the origin of the Christian *episkopos.* The church was a new creation, a new entity. It was distinctive in its head (Christ; Col. 1:18), its gospel (1 Cor. 15:3–6), and its mandate (the Great Commission; Matt. 28:16–20). There is no doubt the church was influenced, to some degree, by its history and cultural context. However, the fulfillment of its assignment required new officers and a different structure, ones we find reflected in the pages of the New Testament.

Qualifications and Responsibilities of Elders

The most important issue concerning leadership in the church is spiritual integrity. Any man who would serve as a pastor or elder must be biblically qualified. Nothing is more important. No office of the church is to be held by spiritually unqualified or disqualified men. It is clear that God is most concerned with the character and service of those who lead his church. *Who* they are and

what they do is far more important than *how many* hold the office. Four texts in particular stand out with respect to God's expectations for those who would shepherd, lead, or oversee his churches: Acts 20:17–38; 1 Timothy 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9; and 1 Peter 5:1–4. Additional texts that address the expectation of the elder(s) and the congregation who follows them include: 1 Corinthians 16:15–16; Galatians 6:6; Ephesians 4:11–16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13; 1 Timothy 5:17–25; Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24. We will examine each of these texts, some in detail, and others more briefly. We will then note, in summary fashion, the qualifications and service God expects his leaders to provide.

Acts 20:17–38

Paul addresses the Ephesian elders at the end of his third missionary journey at Miletus. Here he exhorts the elders: “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28 NKJV). Elders are to guard themselves and their congregation from false teachings and false teachers who will inevitably come. They are “to shepherd” (*poimainein*) the church of God and “be alert” (20:31). They are sufficient for such a task because the Holy Spirit has appointed them as overseers (*episkopoi*). It again is important to see that the terms *presbuteros* and *episkopos* are used interchangeably. In verse 17 (NKJV) Paul summons the “elders,” but in verse 28 the Holy Spirit has made them “overseers.” These are the designated leaders in the church. There is a plurality present, though the exact number is not indicated. Their function, what they do, is what is emphasized. However, persons have joined the debate from various perspectives concerning the *number* of elders.

Strauch says, “The natural reading of the passage, then indicates that there is one church in Ephesus and one body of elders to oversee it.”[45] Others, however, have argued that the church at Ephesus was made up of a number of house churches (similar to Rome or Corinth). Each house church had only one presiding leader (called an overseer or elder) but these house-church leaders (collectively called elders) came together and presided over the city church.[46] The fact is we do not know if the church at Ephesus had more than one house church at that time, though that is likely. Certainly as the number of believers multiplied, there was a need for more house churches. But, even if the church at Ephesus consisted of a number of house churches, there is no indication as to the number of elders each house church had. The Scriptures are simply silent on the issue.

However, one should be honest and note that Acts 20:17 speaks of elders in the plural, Acts 14:23 (NKJV) states that Barnabas and Paul appointed “elders in every church,” and in James 5:14 (NKJV) the one who is sick is to call upon “the elders of the church.” Still, I would again argue that who they are and what they do are of utmost importance.

1 Timothy 3:1–7

Cotton Mather, the American Puritan, said, “The office of the Christian ministry, rightly understood, is the honorable and most important, that any man in the whole world can ever sustain; and it will be one of the wonders and employments of eternity to consider the reasons the wisdom and goodness of God assigned this office to imperfect and guilty man!”[47]

Paul addresses the necessary qualifications for the overseer in 1 Timothy 3:1–7. The emphasis is again on who he is and what he does. “A faithful saying” or “trustworthy word” (3:1 NKJV) is unique to Paul in the Pastorals (five times: 1 Tim. 1:15; 4:9; 2 Tim. 2:1; Titus 3:8). It refers to an important, basic, and well-known truth. Paul says an overseer's motive for service must be pure. The first “desires” (better “aspires”) in 3:1 means to reach for; this is an outward aspiration for a “good work,” not the ambitious pursuit of a prestigious office. The second “desires” in verse 1 means a passionate, consuming want, a strong desire: again its object is the “good work.”[48]

The elder's manner of life is praiseworthy. He is not open to warranted attack or justified criticism. In general and in particular he is blameless, not sinless (3:2); this is his constant and consistent pattern of life. He must be temperate (3:2)—clearheaded, self-controlled, one who thinks wisely and with balance; sober-minded (3:2)—prudent, thoughtful, well disciplined in mind. He sees life as God sees it and orders his priorities accordingly. “Of good behavior” (3:2 NKJV) means well disciplined in life, respectable, well ordered (not chaotic); he consistently has his act together. “Hospitable” (3:2 NKJV) literally means a “lover of strangers.” He has an open heart and an open home; he is friendly and approachable.

A bishop is also to be “a one-woman man” (3:2; cf. Eph. 5:33), and he has control of his children (3:4). Paul employs an important argument establishing the point that the family is the proving ground for leadership in the church (3:5). Wiersbe is on target when he says, “If a man's own children cannot obey and respect him, then his church is not likely to respect and obey his leadership.”[49] An overseer must also be able to teach the Scriptures (3:2). *Didaktikos* carries

the idea of “skilled in teaching” (cf. Titus 1:9 NKJV which says “that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict”). Martin Luther puts it in the correct context when he reminds us:

> Let us then consider it certain and conclusively established that the soul can do without all things except the Word of God, and that where this is not there is no help for the soul in anything else whatever. But if it has the Word it is rich and lacks nothing, since this Word is the Word of life, of truth, of light, of peace, of righteousness, of salvation, of joy, of liberty, of wisdom, of power, of grace, of glory, and of every blessing beyond our power to estimate.[50]

The overseer teaches by example. He is not given (addicted) to wine (3:3)—not one who sits long at his wine, not a slave to drink. He is not violent (3:3)—a giver of blows, a fighter physically, not one easily angered; but gentle (3:3)—considerate, kind, gracious, one who readily forgives. He is not quarrelsome (3:3) but peaceful, uncontentious, one who is willing and ready to listen. He is not covetous (3:3)—literally “not loving money,” not greedy (cf. 6:9–10).

He is wise and avoids the places of temptation. He is not a novice (3:6)—literally “newly planted,” e.g., a new convert. Why? The sin of “pride,” the root sin which captured the heart of the devil and brought him down, is an ever-present danger. Christian maturity requires time and experience. The process cannot be rushed. New believers simply are not spiritually qualified to be pastors. The overseer also aspires to have a good testimony, being respected even by the lost (3:7). In all of the things Paul lists, it is the character, quality and maturity of a man's life that is essential. This theme resonates throughout the Holy Scriptures.[51]

Titus 1:5–9

The list of qualifications here is almost identical to the list in 1 Timothy 3:1–7, with only minor differences. With that in mind we shall briefly note other insights germane to our subject. It is clear again that Paul uses the terms *elder* and *overseer* to refer to the same office (“appoint elders…for an overseer”). The fact that *elders* is plural and *bishop* is singular is of no significance in context. It is natural to list the requirements in the singular (“For an overseer must be…”) since every elder/overseer must personally and individually meet the qualifications. The fact that the lists of Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3 are so similar supports this conclusion. It is of interest that the list in 1 Timothy includes “not a new convert” whereas Titus omits it. This omission may have been necessary

due to the infancy of the Cretan churches. That these were young churches probably also explains Paul's directive to Titus that he appoint elders. Relatively new converts who still met the other qualifications would be needed in leadership, though the process cannot be hurried or rushed.

1 Peter 5:1–4

This text is different from but complementary to the Pauline address in Acts and the texts in the Pastorals. Peter writes to believers scattered throughout "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (1:1 NKJV) who are experiencing "fiery" ("painful," NIV) trials. In 5:1–4 he addresses the leaders of these churches in a gracious and humble manner, referring to himself as a "fellow elder" (*sumpresbuteros*, 5:1). The text is especially important because of the vocabulary Peter uses. With reference to the leaders, they are called "elders" (*presbuterous*) in verse 1. In verse 2 they are admonished to "shepherd" (*poimanate*) God's flock. The verb is an aorist imperative and "includes all that is involved in the work of the shepherd: guiding and guarding, feeding and folding."[52] Numerous translations, including the KJV, NKJV, and NIV follow the Textus Receptus and add "serving as overseer" (*episkopountes*). This translates a present participle. Here in this one text we see the words for elder, pastor, and overseer brought together to speak of a single assignment.

Hiebert summarizes what our study of the New Testament has revealed: "This indicates that as yet no difference between 'elders' and 'bishops' had developed when the letter was written. In the New Testament these two terms are used interchangeably of the same men (Acts 20:17–28; Titus 1:5–7). 'Elder' points to the mature age which qualified the individual for office: 'bishop' (overseer) indicates that the duties of the office involve spiritual oversight."[53] Peter reminds the elders that they shepherd "God's flock" (5:2) and then addresses their motives for ministry in terms of three adverbial modifiers set forth in a negative-positive pairing:

> not by compulsion but willingly;
> not for dishonest gain but eagerly;
> not as being lords over but being examples to the
> flock.

He concludes his charge with God's promise of a heavenly, eternal reward for those who are faithful in discharging their assignment (5:4).

1 Corinthians 16:15–16

As Paul concludes 1 Corinthians, he gives the church at Corinth a parting word of instruction: “Now I exhort you, brothers (you know the household of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints), that you also submit to such as these and to every fellow worker and laborer” (1 Cor. 16:15–16). Here Paul exhorts the Corinthians to submit to the household of Stephanas not only because they were the first converts in Achaia but also because they “devoted themselves” to serving the church. It is clear that Stephanas is viewed as a leader. Paul further commands the church to “submit” (*hupotassesthe*) to Stephanas and those like him. This verb is used only here in the New Testament to refer to how the community of believers is to relate to those who work and labor among them.

The church at Corinth (as is every church) was to be led by the Spirit, but they were also to be led by those who worked and labored among them. Paul urges, and expects, the church to submit to the leadership of those who are more mature in their faith and who are devoted to working and laboring in the church. There are no formal titles given in the text, but Paul wants to make sure that others recognize Stephanas as a leader in the church and that they submit to his leadership and other recognized leaders. It is instructive to note that again we see Paul's normal approach is to appeal to the entire congregation and not simply to the leadership. Paul clearly recognizes leaders within the local churches, but he also believes that all parts of the body are important and essential. He appeals to all the people of God, not just the leaders, to solve difficulties in the church.

Galatians 6:6

In Galatians 6:6 (NKJV) Paul writes, “Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches him.” In the previous verses (6:1–5) Paul admonishes the Galatians to bear one another's burdens. He now relates that theme to teachers of the Word. Those who are being taught are to share with their teachers. There were already teachers who taught the Word to such an extent that they needed to be cared for and financially supported. Because the Galatian churches were newborn congregations, Paul needed to encourage them to financially support the newly founded class of teachers. These teachers were recognized by Paul not only as called and gifted to teach “the Word” but also to have the right to receive support for their work.

Ephesians 4:11

In Ephesians 4:11 Paul lists various “gifts” which the Lord Jesus has given to the church. Interestingly, the gifts in this text are not abilities given to

individuals for the purpose of ministry. Rather, they are the people themselves given by the ascended Christ to the church for its edification. Paul lists four categories of gifted persons: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers. Apostles are listed first in time and importance. According to Ephesians 2:20, the apostles and prophets are foundational gifts of the church. The prophets were those who proclaimed divine words to the community (see 1 Cor. 13:2; 14:22, 29; Eph. 3:5; 2 Pet. 1:19–21). Evangelists are mentioned only here in the writings of Paul, with the exception of 2 Timothy 4:5, where Timothy is exhorted to "do the work of an evangelist" (NKJV).

The noun *pastor* (*poimen*, "shepherd") does not occur elsewhere in the New Testament as a reference to a leader in the church, though the derivative verb and the noun *flock* are found (e.g., 1 Pet. 5:2). The pastor is also given the title *teacher*, which together with *pastor*, denotes one office of ministry. This fits with what we find in 1 Timothy where we read that an overseer should be "apt to teach."[54] Each group or individual has a different function in the community of the saints. Apostles and evangelists have the primary responsibility of starting new churches. Prophets would herald a particular divine word for specific situations, and the pastor-teachers would perform the daily ministry of providing instruction in the Word of God.

Given the description of their activity, it is clear that there is significant overlap. It is likely that pastor-teachers and elders are terms for the same office. MacArthur comments on this and states, "So the term *elder* emphasizes who the man is. *Bishop* speaks of what he does. And *pastor* ('shepherd') deals with how he ministers. All three terms are used of the same church leaders, identifying those who feed and lead the church, but each has a unique emphasis."[55]

1 Thessalonians 5:12–13

To the Thessalonians Paul writes, "But we request of you, brothers, that you recognize those who work hard among you, and who lead you in the Lord and who admonish you and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves" (1 Thess. 5:12–13 NKJV). Paul appeals to the Thessalonian Christians that they "recognize" (or "respect") their leaders. We cannot be certain whether Paul is urging the congregation to *recognize* certain people as leaders or he is rebuking the congregation for not *respecting* their already existing leaders.[56] What is clear is that the text makes a distinction between the "brothers" and those whom they should recognize. Every believer is important to the body of Christ, but not every believer is to be honored and

respected in exactly the same way. Some, because of their calling, gifts, and function in the body are considered worthy of special recognition.

Three participles describe these leaders who are “to be esteemed very highly.” First, they are said to “labor” or “work hard” in the church (5:12). First Timothy 5:17 (NKJV) adds, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.” Second, they are characterized as “those who are over you in the Lord” (1 Thess. 5:12 NKJV). Third, they “admonish” those they lead (1 Thess. 5:12 NKJV). Paul instructs the church to “esteem [their leaders] very highly in love because of their work” (1 Thess. 5:13 NKJV). The adverb “very highly” is emphatic. Heartfelt appreciation should flow from the love the church has for its leaders “because of their work.” Respect and honor for a leader is not based on personality or office, but on the hard work that person performs. The imperative to “be at peace” with one another is best taken with verses 12–13a. Paul is encouraging the congregation as a whole to work together and promote peace within the body.

1 Timothy 5:17–25

In 1 Timothy Paul addresses several issues related to elders. These include their honor, financial support, discipline, and setting apart for service. It is important to note that some believe the references to “the overseer” in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and the references to “the elders” in 1 Timothy 5:17–25 represent two distinct offices.[57] However, the evidence indicates overwhelmingly that Paul uses the two terms to refer to the same office.[58] If overseer and elder are two separate offices, it is strange, if not impossible to explain, why Paul never mentions the qualifications of elders in 1 Timothy, especially since the character of the one who is to fill the office of elder is very important. Here in 5:22, Paul admonishes Timothy not to lay hands on anyone to the office of elder hastily since that position is to be filled only by qualified individuals (cf. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). If the office of an elder is an office distinct from an overseer, it would seem that qualifications would be clearly stated for such an important position.

Paul tells Timothy to be patient so that he will not share in the sins of others. Verses 24–25 add that the sins of some are not “clearly apparent,” and it is difficult to immediately know if one is qualified for an office. Patience is needed to let the character of one's life surface before hastily appointing him to office. This warning is similar to those in 1 Timothy 3:6 (which states that an overseer must not be a recent convert) and 3:10 (which states that a deacon

should also undergo a period of testing in order to confirm his character). Nowhere are the three offices (overseer, elder, and deacon) mentioned together, which suggests that a three-tiered ecclesiastical system is foreign to the pastoral Epistles (as well as the entire New Testament). It is in the writings of Ignatius (c. AD 115) that we see for the first time a three-tiered ecclesiastical system with a bishop, elders, and deacons. Ignatius exhorts his readers to "be eager to do everything in godly harmony, the bishop presiding in the place of God and the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles and the deacons, who are most dear to me, having been entrusted with the service of Jesus Christ" (*Magn.* 6:1).[59] For Ignatius, an overseer (bishop) is clearly distinct from the elders and is the singular head of the city church.

Merkle points out however, that "the fact that qualifications are given and not duties [in 1 Timothy 3] also argues against seeing this epistle in the context of a later, more developed system with a monarchical bishop. The authority of the overseer is nowhere stressed as it is in later writings."[60] Concerning the prominent position of Timothy and Titus in the Pastorals, it is best to see them both as Paul's apostolic delegates with [limited?] authority given to them by Paul in order to see that the churches under Paul's authority remain faithful to the gospel of Christ.[61] There is no question that the authority given to the bishop in Ignatius is significantly greater than that given either to Timothy or Titus. In his letter to the Smyrnaeans, Ignatius writes:

> You must all follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ followed the Father.… Let no one do anything that has to do with the church without the bishop. Only that Eucharist which is under the authority of the bishop (or whomever he himself designates) is to be considered valid. Wherever the bishop appears, there let the congregation be.…It is not permissible either to baptize or to hold a love feast without the bishop. But whatever he approves is also pleasing to God, in order that everything you do may be trustworthy and valid.…It is good to acknowledge God and the bishop. The one who honors the bishop has been honored by God; the one who does anything without the bishop's knowledge serves the devil
> (*Smyrn.* 8:1–9:1).

Elsewhere he writes, "For all those who belong to God and Jesus Christ are with the bishop" (*Phil.* 3:2), and in another place he goes so far as to say that the bishop is to be regarded "as the Lord himself" (*Eph.* 6:1). Nowhere in the Pastorals is obedience to Timothy or Titus equated with obedience to God. In the Pastorals the emphasis is on obedience to the true gospel as taught by Timothy

and Titus, not to an office-bearer.[62]

Elders and overseers are said to have the same function in the church (i.e., ruling and teaching), also suggesting that the two terms refer to the same office. First Timothy 3:4–5 states that an overseer must rule his own house well before he is qualified to take care of the church. First Timothy 5:17 speaks of elders who rule well. First Timothy 3:2 says an overseer must be "able to teach" (cf. Titus 1:9). First Timothy 5:17 speaks of elders who "work hard in preaching and teaching."

The phrase "especially those who labor in word and doctrine" (5:17) has been the subject of intense debate. Some, particularly those in the Presbyterian tradition, argue that this verse makes a distinction between two different categories of elders: those who rule and those who teach. However, if this is the case, this is the only verse in Scripture to make this crucial distinction. Further, the New Testament is silent on God's expectations of "ruling elders" since those mentioned in 1 Timothy 3:2 fall into the category of those who teach. But then again, those same leaders are addressed in 1 Timothy 3:4–5 as those who must also rule well. Decker notes that "the terms 'teaching elder' and 'ruling elder' do not appear historically until Calvin."[63] Hence, teaching and ruling are God's expectations for all who serve as a bishop, an elder, a pastor. They must teach and rule effectively according to God's standard. Knight, a Presbyterian, is helpful when he writes that Paul is likely "speaking of a subgroup of the overseers that consist of those who are *especially* gifted by God to teach, as opposed to other overseers, who must all be able to teach."[64]

Why then are two terms used for the same office? The answer seems to be simply this: *elder* is more a description of character whereas *overseer* is more a description of function. One points to the dignity of the man and the other to the duties he performs. These two terms came to be used interchangeably as they both referred to the leaders of the congregation. *Presbuteros* conveys the idea of a wise, mature leader who is honored and respected by those of the community by virtue of the integrity of his life. *Episkopos* looks more to the work of the individual whose duty it is to provide "oversight" over the congregation. The terms denote the same office in the New Testament.

A Summation of the New Testament Qualifications for Leadership

In New Testament churches God raised up and qualified, by the work of the Holy Spirit, men who were appointed to exercise oversight over and spiritually care for the churches. These men are called elders, bishops, pastors. The three terms are interchangeable and are all used of the one office. The New Testament never specifies the number of elders, though the term appears almost always in the plural. Their character, integrity, and maturity are always of primary importance. Their number, therefore, as I will argue, would appear to be of a flexible nature.

Furthermore, anyone serving as an elder is to meet *all* the qualifications for the office—including a *call to ministry* and *aptness to teach*, that is, to preach. This is clearly what Paul has in mind. Some modern models of an elder system come up short at this point. Paul did not have in mind an elder, who meets the requirements of 1 Timothy 3, who only teaches a Sunday school or Bible class. On the other extreme, he did not have in mind a board of elders who function virtually as a corporate board under or alongside the pastor. These elder models may be growing in popularity, but they badly miss the biblical benchmark of what God says an elder is and does.

Functions and Responsibilities of the Pastor/Elder

The pastor/elder is given eight functions in the New Testament. He has overall responsibility for the oversight and direction of the church (Heb. 13:17). Second, the pastor is responsible to seek in all matters the mind of Christ (who is the head of the church) through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God (Eph. 1:22; Col. 1:18; 1 Pet. 5:2). Third, the pastor must be apt to teach, able to exhort the church in sound doctrine and be ready to refute those who contradict the truth (Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9). Fourth, the pastor shall provide instruction for the maintenance of healthy relationships within the church (Gal. 6:1; 1 Thess. 5:12; 2 Thess. 3:14–15). Fifth, the pastor shall exercise at least general oversight of the financial matters of the church (Acts 11:30). Sixth, the pastor should lead (with appropriate congregational input) in the appointing of deacons as necessary to accomplish the mission of the church (Acts 6:1–6). Then, in the seventh place, the pastor is to lead by *example* (Heb. 13:7; 1 Pet. 5:2–3). Finally, the pastor is to lead in the exercise of church discipline (Gal. 6:1) but not to the exclusion of the entire body when warranted (Matt. 18; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2).

Qualifications of the Pastor/Elder

What are the qualifications for service as a pastor/elder? This is a much

longer list. He must be *above reproach*, that is, blameless, having unimpeachable integrity, no grounds for accusation of improper Christian behavior (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6). He must be the *husband of one wife*, that is, he has only one woman in his life and is to be faithful to her; he is a one-woman kind of man (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6). The pastor needs to be *temperate*, not in bondage to himself or desires of the flesh, self-controlled, calm, sober, collected in spirit (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8). He must be *prudent*, sensible, wise, balanced in judgment, not given to quick superficial decisions based on immature thinking (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8). To qualify as a pastor/elder, one must be *respectable*, demonstrating good behavior and an orderly life (1 Tim. 3:2). Then, he needs to be *hospitable*, generous, a "stranger lover," willing to share what he has with others (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8).

The overseer must also be *able to teach*, that is, he can communicate the truth of God to others and exhort them in sound doctrine (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9). He is *not addicted to wine*, not a drunkard; not controlled by but free from alcohol (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7). A pastor must be *not pugnacious*, not physically violent, not a person who creates trouble and looks for fights (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7). He needs to be *uncontentious*, not given to quarreling or selfish argumentation (1 Tim. 3:3). He needs to be *gentle*, fair, equitable, not insisting on his own rights (1 Tim. 3:3). The pastor is *not fond of sordid gain*, free from the love of money (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7). He *manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity*, which means that he has the respect of his family and is recognized as the head/leader of his household (1 Tim. 3:4; Titus 1:6). He is *not a new convert* but is instead a mature believer, having been a Christian long enough to demonstrate the reality of his conversion and the depth of his spirituality (1 Tim. 3:6).

The elder further has a *good reputation among people outside the church;* unbelievers must respect his *character and integrity* (1 Tim. 3:7). Then, an overseer is *not self-willed*, not stubborn, or insisting on his own way, not forcing his own ideas and opinions on others (Titus 1:7). He is *not quick-tempered*, not one who "flies off the handle" or gets angry quickly (Titus 1:7). An overseer *loves what is good*, desires to do God's will in everything (Titus 1:8). He must be *just*, fair, impartial, able to make objective judgments based upon biblical principles (Titus 1:8). Finally, the pastor/elder/ overseer is spoken of as *holding fast the faithful word*, committed to God's Word as true and authoritative, obedient to God's Word in all matters, not hypocritical, but living in accordance with that which it teaches (Titus 1:9).

God is not demanding perfection in the above areas, for he knows the

weaknesses of man. But what he does require is a *heart commitment* to his standards and a *willingness to conform* to them. To be a pastor, a man must demonstrate a high degree of maturity in all of the areas listed above.

Accusations or criticisms of an elder are to be received according to the instructions laid down in 1 Timothy 5:19–21. If the pastor is guilty of an offense, he shall be counseled by other godly, spiritually mature men with a view toward restoration (Gal. 6:1–2). If the erring elder continues to sin, he shall be removed from office and disciplined according to Matthew 18:15–17. If a spiritual leader is not guilty of that which is illegal, immoral, unethical, or clearly unbiblical, it is the responsibility of the church to follow his leadership, as this is the will of God (cf. 1 Thess. 5:12–15; Heb. 13:7, 17). However, restoration to fellowship does not always entail restoration to leadership. If a man is not above reproach, he is disqualified, in some cases permanently from a position of leadership.[65]

Spiritual integrity is crucial and nonnegotiable. This expectation and pattern is found in both Testaments and is rooted in the words *elder* and *overseer* themselves.

Historical Considerations Past and Present: Baptists Attempt to Chart Their Course

Baptists were birthed out of the "free church" tradition. Seeking rigorously to follow the New Testament in all that it teaches, Baptist churches were made up of baptized believers who operated through democratic processes under the direction and leadership of pastor(s) or elder(s). The Southern Baptist Convention was born out of the conflict and crisis over slavery and organizational issues in Augusta, Georgia, in 1845. From their inception "Baptist churches practiced a more thorough democracy than did the American federal and state governments."[66] Seeking to follow the pattern revealed in the New Testament, Baptists affirmed the existence of two offices in the church: elder and deacon. Some churches had a plurality of elders and believed "that Christ required them to have a plurality of elders." They also believed that "all elders were equal in office but differed in duties; they were equal in rank but differed in service.…But since all ecclesiastical authority resided in the congregation jointly, the elders had no formal authority to act on any matter as a body of elders. Their role was rather to initiate, advise, and exhort."[67]

Some also believed a distinction existed between teaching elders with

pastoral responsibilities and ruling or lay elders who governed. Others believed the plurality of elders found in the New Testament was "necessary because persecution forced congregations to meet separately in small groups in houses and each meeting needed the services of an elder."[68] Modern congregations, however, can meet together, and a single elder is sufficient. Still others said plurality of elders was not commanded, but it did provide important benefits and, therefore, was a wiser course of action. These different viewpoints and the reasons for them are acknowledged and explained in *The Gospel Developed*, written in 1846 by W. B. Johnson, the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention. He writes:

> I am aware that difference of opinion…prevails among those who love the Lord in sincerity and truth. Some think that general principles only are laid down in the New Testament, on the government and orders of the churches, and that believers are at liberty to adopt the details according to their own judgment. Others believe that the Head of the church has authoritatively settled by his apostles, not only *the form of government* which his churches should adopt, but also the *ordinances* which they should observe under that form.[69]

Johnson himself was sympathetic to the latter position. He argued for plurality of elders, and he also made a distinction between ruling and teaching elders.[70]

Moving to survey the important Baptist confessions, we find statements that are general enough to allow for variation in answering the elder question as long as the form of church government is congregational. The New Hampshire Confession (1833) speaks of the church as "a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel…officers are Bishops or Pastors, and Deacons, whose qualifications, claims, and duties are defined in the Epistles to Timothy and Titus."[71] The 1925 Baptist Faith and Message addressed the issue of the church in article XII. It also appends, as does each of the articles, scriptural references in support of the statement. It reads:

> *XII. The Gospel Church*
>
> A church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ, governed by his laws, and exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by his word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Its Scriptural officers are bishops, or elders,

and deacons. Matt. 16:18; Matt. 18:15–18; Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; Acts 2:41–42; 5:13–14; 2 Cor. 9:13; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 4:14; Acts 14:23; Acts 6:3, 5–6; Heb. 13:17; 1 Cor. 9:6, 14.

It is clear that the 1925 statement is rooted in the New Hampshire Confession with only minor changes. With respect to the offices of the church, scriptural officers are now "bishops, or *elders,* and deacons" (emphasis added). The New Hampshire Confession spoke of "Bishops or *Pastors*, and Deacons." It is clear that the meaning is the same. Most Baptists, following the teachings of the New Testament, believe the terms *bishop*, *pastor*, and *elder* are used interchangeably and speak of the same church office.

The 1963 Baptist Faith and Message was a revision of the 1925 statement. The statement on the church is significantly expanded. It constitutes article VI.

VI. The Church

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is a local body of baptized believers who are associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel, observing the two ordinances of Christ, committed to His teachings, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. This church is an autonomous body, operating through democratic processes under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In such a congregation, members are equally responsible. Its Scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. The New Testament speaks also of the church as the body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages. Matt. 16:15–19; 18:15–20; Acts 2:41–42, 47; 5:11–14; 6:3–6; 13:1–3; 14:23, 27; 15:1–30; 16:5; 20:28; Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 3:16; 5:4–5; 7:17; 9:13–14; 12; Ephes. 1:22–23; 2:19–22; 3:8–11, 21; 5:22–32; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:18; 1 Tim. 3:1–15; 4:14; 1 Peter 5:1–4; Rev. 2–3; 21:2–3.

Added to the 1925 statement are emphases on (1) the local church and its autonomy (a reflection of Landmark influence?), (2) the fact that the congregation operates through democratic processes under the lordship of Jesus Christ, (3) the equal responsibility of each member, and (4) the reality of the church as consisting of all the redeemed of all of the ages. With respect to the officers of the church there is also a change in terminology. Now the officers are simply noted as being pastors and deacons. There is no reference to bishops or elders, in spite of their continuous presence in previous Baptist writings and confessions. However, we probably should not make too much out of this. It is likely that the 1963 confession simply represents the popular usage of the day.

Churches were now referring to their leader(s) as pastor(s). It is possible that the term *bishop* was now more easily misunderstood, or even viewed negatively, in the context of a growing Roman Catholic population in America. The reason the term *elder* was being used less often is not altogether clear.

Before examining the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message, we should look at an important controversy that took place in June 1988 at the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, which convened in San Antonio, Texas. The controversy revolved around Resolution 5 and was on the priesthood of the believer. Sutton notes that "In the early 1980's, three waves of teaching came from the Sunday School Board [now LifeWay], all of which emphasized the egalitarian nature of ministry in the church. First was the doctrine of the laity. Following that was the emphasis on Shared Ministry, and finally, the apex was the doctrinal study on the priesthood of the believers."[72] A number of persons believed that though it was well intended, this emphasis was dangerously out of balance. It eroded the appropriate leadership the New Testament clearly gives to the pastors of the church. The resolution was put forward and passed, though not without controversy. It is my judgment that the resolution does strike a balance, a balance discovered in the Bible. It acknowledges the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, and it affirms that God raises up and calls into service pastors or elders who are to lead the church in its gospel ministry. The complete resolution reads as follows:

> *Resolution on the Priesthood of the Believer*
>
> *June 1988*
>
> WHEREAS, None of the five major writing systematic theologians[73] in Southern Baptist history have given more than passing reference to the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer in their systematic theologies; and
>
> WHEREAS, The Baptist Faith and Message preamble refers to the priesthood of the believer, but provides no definition or content to the term; and
>
> WHEREAS, The high profile emphasis on the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer in Southern Baptist life is a recent historical development; and
>
> WHEREAS, The priesthood of the believer is a term which is subject to both misunderstanding and abuse; and
>
> WHEREAS, The doctrine of the priesthood of the believer can be used to justify the undermining of pastoral authority in the local church.

> Be it therefore RESOLVED, That the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in San Antonio, Texas, June 14–16, 1988, affirm its belief in the biblical doctrine of the priesthood of the believer (1 Peter 2:9 and Revelation 1:6); and
>
> Be it further RESOLVED, That we affirm that this doctrine in no way gives license to misinterpret, explain away, demythologize, or extrapolate out elements of the supernatural from the Bible; and
>
> Be it further RESOLVED, That the doctrine of the priesthood of the believer in no way contradicts the biblical understanding of the role, responsibility, and authority of the pastor which is seen in the command to the local church in Hebrews 13:17, "Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account;" and
>
> Be finally RESOLVED, That we affirm the truth that elders, or pastors, are called of God to lead the local church (Acts 20:28).

All are priests, but not all lead. All are priests, but some are called by God to give direction and exercise authority. The Bible provides a clear and necessary balance as to how the congregation and its pastors relate and work together. In this resolution, Baptists struggled to keep this balance in place.

The 2000 Baptist Faith and Message is something of a theological landmark of the theological controversy that rocked the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s and 1990s. The statement on the church is again similar to the 1925 and 1963 Baptist Faith and Message statements, with some important differences as well. The statement reads:

> *VI: The Church*
>
> A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are pastors and deacons. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture. The New Testament speaks also of the church as the body of Christ which includes all

> of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation. Matthew 16:15–19; 18:15–20; Acts 2:41–42, 47; 5:11–14; 6:3–6; 13:1–3; 14:23, 27; 15:1–30; 16:5; 20:28; Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 3:16; 5:4–5; 7:17; 9:13–14; 12; Ephesians 1:22–23; 2:19–22; 3:8–11, 21; 5:22–32; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:18; 1 Timothy 2:9–14; 3:1–15; 4:14; Hebrews 11:39–40; 1 Peter 5:1–4; Revelation 2–3; 21:2–3.

The word *autonomous* has been moved toward the front of the article, and, interestingly, the statement "operates under the lordship of Jesus Christ through democratic processes" reverses the order of the 1963 statement. This revision is more biblical in its ordering, and it also draws attention to the fact that we make our decisions and exercise our responsibility in relation to the lordship of Christ. Dever is exactly correct when he writes:

> A church is not just straightforward democracy, for in the churches there is a common recognition of our fallen state, of our tendency to err, and, on the other hand, of the inerrancy of God's Word. So the members of a church congregation are democratic, perhaps, only in the sense that they work together as a congregation to try to understand God's Word.…As leaders and congregation, we strive for the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace; we work together for what we believe would be best for the church.[74]

This article, as did the 1963 statement, affirms the scriptural offices as pastors and deacons. No specific number of either is noted. Finally, the statement affirms the giftedness of all persons for service in the body of Christ but affirms that the office of pastor is limited to men who are scripturally qualified.

In this brief survey one thing seems clear: Baptists have struggled, not always with success to be sure, to be true to the teachings of the New Testament in all matters of faith and practice. This dogged devotion to Scripture is also seen in their understanding of church government and polity. Certainly Baptists, like others, have sometimes been captive to the currents of the culture that surrounds them. In recent years, however, this would seem not to be the case. Southern Baptists have been swimming against the currents of modernity and many other denominations. Their stance on issues like inerrancy, abortion, homosexuality, the exclusivity of the gospel, and women as pastors are just a few examples that immediately come to mind. In the context of their polity, Southern Baptist churches have been fiercely Congregational. They have consistently recognized two and only two offices in the local church: pastors (elders) and deacons. This

is what the New Testament teaches. This is what Baptists seek to practice.

A Defense of the Single-Elder Position

When I accepted the assignment to defend the Congregational/ single-elder position, I had several suspicions before I began, each of which has proven to be true. First, I believed from my study of the Bible of over twenty-five years that if one restricted oneself to the data of the New Testament, Congregational church government and polity are inescapable (with the corollary of local church autonomy). Any type of monarchical system locating authority in a bishop is a second-century development and cannot be defended by Scripture. On this latter point W. E. Vine is correct when he asserts:

> The Apostles did not establish an earthly system, an organization of churches centralized in ecclesiastical headquarters. Such a policy is significantly absent both from their methods and from their doctrine.…One will search in vain in the Acts and the Epistles for even an intimation of the establishment of such an institution.…There is no such thing as external unity by way of federation, affiliation or amalgamation, either of churches in any given locality or of all the churches together.[75]

The Presbyterian model fails on similar grounds. Furthermore its distinction between teaching and ruling elders hinges on a single verse (1 Tim. 5:17), and the standard Presbyterian reading is simply not the best interpretation of the text. The fact is this distinction does not appear until the time of Calvin.

My second suspicion was this: a defense of a single elder (pastor) leading a local congregation probably did not have as much scriptural warrant as is popularly thought, at least in Southern Baptist life. Again, I discovered my intuition to be correct. The argument for a plurality of elders, pastors, overseers, leaders is easier to make based upon the biblical evidence. For example, every time the word *elder* (*presbuteros*) appears in the context of church leaders, it is always in the plural (e.g., Acts 14:23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1). So, is the case for a single elder biblically indefensible? It is my contention that the answer to that question is no. I believe a case for the single-elder position, as a scripturally acceptable option, can be made on biblical, theological, and practical grounds. Scripture allows flexibility at this point and therefore, so should we. Two lines of evidence will be put forth that argue for the permissibility of a single elder leading a local congregation, a single elder who serves as the pastor-teacher (Eph. 4:11). A third and final

avenue of evidence will be presented in the section on practical concerns.

Biblical Evidence

The Bible never specifies a precise number of elders for a local congregation. Scripture is silent on this point. Unlike Congregationalism, which is quite clear, for example, on the exercise of church discipline, there is no corresponding evidence on how many elders a church had, should have, or must have. At this point it is important to take into consideration the reality of the house church in the early history of Christianity. It is virtually certain that churches initially met in homes. At first they would meet in a single home,[76] but as the church grew and multiplied it was necessary to move into additional houses. This, of course, required multiplication of leadership as well. Carson is fair in his handling of the biblical data and balanced in his assessment when he writes:

> Plurality of elders, if not mandated, appears to have been common, and perhaps the norm. On the other hand, only "church" (*ekklesia* in the singular) is used for the congregation of all believers in one city, never "churches"; one reads of churches in Galatia, but of *the* church in Antioch or Jerusalem or Ephesus. Thus it is possible, though not certain, that a single elder may have exercised authority in relation to one house group—a house group that in some cases constituted part of the citywide church—so that the individual elder would nevertheless be one of many in that citywide "church" taken as a whole.[77]

We should also take into account the reference to the pastor-teacher in Ephesians 4:11. This is the only office of the four mentioned in the verse (the other three being apostles, prophets, and evangelists) that is directly related to the local church. It is extremely likely that the pastor-teacher is an elder, but the unique designation (pastor-teacher occurs only here) and context strongly suggests that this office is also distinctive (within the category of elder). It has become popular today for many churches to use the term "senior pastor." While the term itself does not appear in Scripture, the idea it conveys may indeed reflect Ephesians 4:11. Dever, himself an advocate of plurality of elders, addresses this and states, "If you ask the question, 'Does the Bible teach that there is to be a senior pastor-figure alongside, or inside the eldership?' I think the answer to that question is 'No, not directly.' Having said that, I do think that we *can* discern a distinct role among the elders for the one who is the primary public

teacher of the church."[78]

Though a senior pastor (elder) is not identical to a single pastor (elder), there is certainly some similarity. In essence the pastor-teacher is "first among equals" by virtue of his office and function among the elders, if there is a plurality. One who occupied the primary office of teacher held a significant place of leadership in the Old Testament and the synagogue (cf. John 3:10 NKJV, where Jesus calls Nicodemus "the teacher of Israel"). It is difficult to believe this would have been diminished in the churches that certainly were influenced, to some degree, by both (consider James 3:1 at this point). The pastor-teacher is a gift of God given to his church to lead, teach, and protect her.

One final consideration in support of "single," or perhaps better "senior" elder (pastor) is a pattern that we find in Scripture, both in the Old and New Testaments. That pattern is a plurality of leaders with a senior leader over them. In Exodus 18 Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, saw that Moses' "Lone Ranger" approach to administration was not working (vv. 13–18). Bottom line: it was a physical impossibility to judge all the people who came before him daily. Jethro admonished him with great wisdom in verses 19–22:

> Listen now to my voice; I will give you counsel, and God will be with you: Stand before God for the people, so that you may bring the difficulties to God. And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do. Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens (NKJV).

Several observations are in order: (1) Moses continued as the primary teacher; (2) those who now joined him in the work had to meet definite spiritual qualifications; (3) these "able men" worked both *with* and *under* Moses. As the senior leader he handled the "great matters." These other spiritually qualified leaders handled the "small matters." In Numbers 11 Moses gathered seventy elders, at the direction of the Lord, so they could help him in his work (v. 17). They worked *alongside* Moses, but they also worked *under* Moses. In the New Testament, Jesus calls the Twelve to be with him and learn from him. Peter, James, and John are *of* the Twelve but also, in some sense, *over* the Twelve. Likewise Peter is *of* the three but also, at least in some genuine sense, *above* the three (see Matt. 16:17–19). The much-disputed Jerusalem conference of Acts 15 continues this pattern. James, the half brother of Jesus, is no monarchical bishop. He is with, of, alongside the apostles and elders. And yet he is above or over

them as well. He presides over the conference, as verses 13–29 demonstrate. He also directs the judgment of the conference, as seen in verses 19–22.

In Galatians, Paul adds evidence to the leadership position held by James in the church at Jerusalem (1:19; 2:9, 12). Throughout these important texts the pattern of a senior leader among the leaders emerges. This senior leader is no dictator or autocrat. He is accountable and responsible to the other leaders and to the congregation, as he ought to be. Tragically this is something many pastors and churches neglect, and the churches of the Lord Jesus have suffered greatly as a result. Biblically, a case can be made for the appropriateness and legitimacy of a single (better "senior") pastor or elder.

Theological Considerations

When it comes to those who will lead the local body of Christ, the focus and emphasis of the Scriptures is clear: leadership is based upon spiritual qualification for service. This issue is so important that the New Testament addresses it numerous times, goes into significant detail in four crucial passages (Acts 20:28–38; 1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9; and 1 Pet. 5:1–4), and dedicates three books to this subject overall (1 and 2 Tim. and Titus). What concerns God most is the godly character and spiritual qualifications of those who would lead. His divine instruction zeros in on *who* they are and *what* they do, not *how many.* Men who are God-called, spiritually qualified, Spirit-gifted, and pastorally concerned are the only men who should be authorized to shepherd the flock of God. In some instances there may be only one man who meets the qualifications. This would not be at all unusual in a church plant or start, or even in a small church.

At one time in America, as the gospel moved westward, pastors often ministered to multiple churches because of need and a shortage of God-called men. "Quarter churches" were congregations that had a circuit pastor-teacher who ministered once a month.[79] Was this an ideal arrangement? Of course it was not. Were they true churches nonetheless? Absolutely. They were local congregations being led and instructed by a God-called, scripturally qualified minister. The issue is not how many. The issue is who and what this man is before God based upon biblical expectations. Where only one is qualified, God would only want one. As other men grow in their faith, mature, and meet the biblical requirements, they should join the work of ministry alongside, and probably under, the more mature minister who has discipled them. It is also the

case that they may best serve the body of Christ by being sent out to help in the work where there is a shortage of scripturally qualified ministers. MacArthur adds a valuable word on the issue when he says:

> How does God reveal to the church who the elders should be so that the church can ordain them? This passage [Acts 14:21–23] suggests that prayer and fasting are part of that process. But in the end, the church must determine whom God desires to serve as leaders based on a set of biblical qualifications that are clearly delineated. [Elders] are chosen because God has called and prepared them for the leadership of the church. The men whom God selects will meet the qualifications.[80]

I would only add that what qualifies several also qualifies one. In some situations only one meets the qualifications. This in and of itself testifies to the legitimacy and acceptability of a single elder (pastor) model. This is not to say it is the most desirable. A plurality of God-called men in leadership, led by a senior pastor/teacher, mutually accountable to one another, is certainly preferable.

A second theological consideration is the issue of giftedness. Even in a plurality-of-elders model, there is room and a place for a special leader, a senior-pastor, a pastor-teacher. It is, in my judgment, absolutely essential that there is someone who, by the moral integrity of his character and the gifts bestowed on him by God, takes the lead in charting the course and direction of the church. This is what 1 Timothy 5:17 (NKJV) is talking about when it says “double honor” is due to those who “rule well and labor in the Word and doctrine.” Such men give their life to gospel ministry as their vocation and calling. They are not greater than others who are called by God and scripturally qualified, and yet they stand out as the leader among the leaders. This is exactly how many large churches with multiple staff members function. The one deficiency that I too often see in this model is the absence of an attitude of mutual submission (Eph. 5:21), where the senior pastor listens to and is accountable to the other ministers who serve with and under him. Fee provides a scathing critique on this issue when he observes:

> Although most Protestants in theory deny apostolic succession to reside in its clergy, *de facto* it is practiced in vigorous and sometimes devastating ways—in the “one-man show” of many denominational churches or in the little dictatorships in other (especially “independent”) churches. And how did such a pluralism of papacies emerge? Basically from two sources (not to mention the fallenness of the clergy whose egos often love such power): (a) from the fact that the local pastor is so often

seen (and often sees him/herself) as the authoritative interpreter of the "sole authority"—Scripture; (b) from the pastor's functioning in the role of authority, thus assuming the mantle of Paul or of a Timothy or Titus.[81]

In defending the single-elder model, I want to be clear that I am defending a particular and definite form of the model, one that sees the necessity of and demand for mutual submission, respect, and accountability. There is no biblical defense for a dictatorial, autocratic, CEO model for ministry leadership. Pastors (elders) are shepherd-leaders, servant-leaders to the congregation and one another. One need only look to the tiny and much neglected letter of 3 John and the shameful example of a man named Diotrophes to see this autocratic pattern played out. It is not a pretty picture.[82] "Elders are to be other-centered.…As good shepherds, they are not to fleece the flock in self-interest but to tend and care for each of the sheep."[83] As gifted leaders they do lead. As God-called shepherds they serve, even putting their life on the line for the Savior's sheep if necessary. This is God's assignment for his undershepherds.

Practical Concerns and Summary Observations

In trying to bring our study together, several observations are in order and a number of issues need to be emphasized from the area of practical theology. First, Congregationalism is the form of church government and polity we find modeled and practiced in the New Testament. This is where the evidence leads us based upon our investigation of the whole of the New Testament. The Episcopal form of government must appeal to a second-century development, which goes beyond and, in my judgment, against the pattern we see reflected in the New Testament.

Second, Congregationalism honors best the doctrine of the priesthood of all the believers and the church as the body of Christ. It recognizes the fact that God calls each believer to doctrinal vigilance (Jude 3) and that God gifts each and every believer for service to the body. It recognizes that God has committed certain matters to the congregation as a whole (e.g., church discipline).

In the third place, Congregationalism will only function effectively within the context of a regenerate church membership and discipline. Without these two essential pillars of polity being honored and consistently practiced, unbelieving, carnal persons will enter into the affairs of the church with devastating consequences. One can quickly think of the classic Wednesday night or Sunday night business meeting when friends and family who have not been in a church

house in years suddenly show up to vote the pastor out or crusade for some other carnal and godless cause.

Fourth, Congregationalism often is best practiced in the form of a representative model. The church should seek out, call, and follow godly leaders. We should willingly and joyfully submit to their direction and leadership (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24; also 1 Thess. 5:12–13). We should wisely leave the everyday affairs of church life in their hands and banish forever the monthly business meeting (where is this found in the Bible?) that provides repeated opportunities for persons to exercise their carnality. I have never met a person who said that a church business meeting was an occasion for spiritual blessing and edification. I have met many who have said that attending one was a spiritual low point that dishonored Christ, harmed the gospel, and left bruised and battered saints strewn everywhere. This is not to argue for the church as a whole never coming together. I have made my position clear on this. So has, I believe, the New Testament. I would simply suggest such meetings should be less often (annual?). There is room for and wisdom in calling special meetings as major items of business dictate (e.g., church discipline, establishing a church constitution, calling a pastor [or other staff], ordaining men to the ministry, purchasing property, constructing buildings, etc). Here the congregation, as a whole body, should be involved.

As a fifth consideration, calling and following God-called leaders does not mean there is to be no accountability. There is accountability both to God and the congregation. There also needs to be some form of close or "inner circle" accountability as well. This is especially important where the single-elder model is practiced. Carson points out that "ironically, some forms of congregationalism elevate the pastor, once he has been voted in, to near papal authority, in practice if not in theory."[84] The wisdom of Proverbs provides helpful counsel on this point. "Fools die for lack of wisdom" (Prov. 10:21 NKJV); "where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in a multitude of counselors there is safety" (Prov. 11:14 NKJV); "a faithful witness does not lie, but a false witness will utter lies" (Prov. 14:5 NKJV); "a man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; he rages against all wise judgment. A fool has no delight in understanding, but in expressing his own heart" (Prov. 18:1–2 NKJV); "plans are established by counsel" (Prov. 20:18 NKJV); "and in a multitude of counselors there is safety" (Prov. 24:6 NKJV); "a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver. Like an earring of gold and an ornament of fine gold is a wise rebuker to an obedient ear" (Prov. 25:11–12 NKJV); "faithful are the wounds of a friend" (Prov. 27:6 NKJV); "he who rebukes a man will find more favor afterward than

he who flatters with the tongue" (Prov. 28:23 NKJV).

In addition, Psalm 1 challenges us (by negative instruction) to walk in the counsel of the godly, stand in the path of the righteous, and sit in the seat of the hopeful (faithful). Sexual scandal has ravaged the body of Christ in recent decades, and the fallout has been horrific. Almost without exception those who have fallen admitted that they had neglected their daily walk with Christ through the regular reading of his Word, lost intimacy with their mate, and failed to establish real and genuine accountability with men who could look them in the face and ask the hard questions and demand answers. Terminology, with respect to the leadership, is not the most important issue in this context. Call them what you will, elders or overseers or pastors need accountability on a close intimate basis with those who love them and love them enough to "speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15 NKJV) even when it hurts.

There is no place for pride in the Christian life. There is no place for a Lone Ranger approach to ministry. We should remember that even the Lone Ranger had Tonto! We need others who can encourage us and also hold us accountable. This is especially true for the shepherd who watches over God's flock. All of us have weaknesses, blind spots, areas of deficiency. A counsel of godly men around and about us, in some form, is absolutely essential for the health and safety of a minister.

Sixth, having made the case for accountability, I believe we must also affirm the God-ordained mandate to let God-called leaders lead. As a member of my local church, I gladly submit to the leadership and direction of my pastor. My "followship" is not that of blind loyalty. As previously noted, if my pastor were to do something unbiblical, immoral, illegal, or unethical, I am biblically obligated to confront him and to follow the pattern of 1 Timothy 5:19–20. If I disagree with a decision he makes, the direction he provides, or a judgment he renders, I have the right to go to him and share my concern. But having done this, I am then to get behind him and support his leadership whether I agree with him or not. Why? Because he is the God-called leader of the church and I am not. God tells me plainly to remember (pray for), obey and submit to my pastor because he (1) watches over my soul and (2) must give an account to God (Heb. 13:7, 17). God wants elders to serve the congregation with joy and not grief. I do my part to ensure this by obeying and submitting. I know this mind-set is foreign to our radically autonomous, democratic, and egalitarian culture. It is, however, clearly biblical, and we ignore or disobey God's command on this point only to our own shame and loss (Heb. 13:17b).

Seventh, strong pastoral leadership is essential to the growth and maturation of the church. I know of no exception to this, and the extensive research of my friend and colleague, Thom Rainer, bears this out.[85] Churches that are growing numerically and spiritually accept and follow strong leadership by their pastor(s) and staff members. This is not surprising given the fact that this is the model for church and ministry we find established in Scripture.

As an eighth consideration, I note that Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee, states with his characteristic wit, "Anything without a head is dead. Anything with several heads is a freak." That is simply a colorful way of recognizing the fact that someone has to lead. Though many may give counsel, provide input, and share wisdom, there nevertheless must be a leader out front leading the way. However, because the church and the ministry are spiritual in nature, consensus should always be the goal, especially among the pastors or elders (or staff). *My way or the highway* sounds cute, but it is not biblical.

Ninth, and finally, I could personally pastor a church with an official plurality of elders, a church where there are co-pastors or a church where there is a single pastor. Why? Because quite simply, I believe that the New Testament allows such flexibility in church polity. In each and every model I would seek to guide, not drive, lead, or dictate. I would establish, where it is not already in place, an accountability relationship with other godly men that I might safely and effectively discharge my duty as a minister of Jesus Christ. This is biblical, wise, and, I believe, essential for the health and well-being of the church. I would follow a shepherd model as I lead God's flock and in all things, I would strive for the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). And yet it is possible to get the structure right and still miss the mark if the Spirit of Christ is absent. Clowney is undoubtedly right when he says:

> Even the best form of church government is an empty shell if these principles [Christ's headship, the church as the *organic life* of His body, and the principles of service and stewardship guiding the leadership] do not grip the hearts of those who lead and those who follow. Better by far are imperfect structures in the hands of devoted servants of Christ than the most biblical form of church government practiced in pride or in a loveless and vindictive spirit.[86]

Conclusion

Believers should be grateful for the gifted leaders God gives to his churches. Whether their number is one, a few, or many, they are to be loved, respected and followed. Submission to their leadership is not absolute. Our ultimate head is Christ, and our final authority is his Word. If an elder does something that is unbiblical, immoral, unethical, or illegal, the church is obligated to follow the pattern of discipline laid out in Scripture (e.g., Matt. 18:15–20; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2; Gal. 6). In particular 1 Timothy 5:19–21 is to be honored and obediently followed. Short of the four categories noted that would require an elder's discipline, churches should follow his/their leadership in recognition of God's gifts and calling in their life.

Sam Thorpe gets very practical in addressing the ways a church can help its elders. All pastors would count it a joy to have their people doing the following: Pray for them. Pray that they may remain close to the Lord in their personal walk with Christ. Then, give them respect. As men raised up by God and accountable to God, they deserve our respect. Third, submit to them. Undermining the leadership will harm the local body and will bring a bitter spirit to your own soul. Fourth, become a helper. Discover your own spiritual gift and be willing to exercise it profitably for the well-being of the fellowship. Fifth, demonstrate commitment. Place the “assembling of the saints” as a high priority of your time and schedule, and show that level of commitment in all of your churchly duties as a “good and faithful servant.” Sixth, seek their advice. There is wise counsel in the plurality of godly leadership. Finally, accept them in the Lord. Each elder is uniquely different yet divinely appointed to serve the people of God, upholding the unity of the body of Christ. Avoid setting artificial expectations for them and accept them as from the Lord.[87] This is good counsel.

Responses to Daniel L. Akin's Single-Elder Position

Response by Paul F. M. Zahl

Daniel Akin's approach to church government is strongly exegetical and argues for the Baptist model of local independent churches governed by a single pastor. Akin's tone is less regal than Dr. Reymond's and allows for some flexibility and also some exceptions. For Akin, the “single elder” model of church government works for the well-being of the church, its *bene esse.* It is not constitutive of it, its *esse.* As a *bene esse* Anglican, I am more comfortable with Dr. Akin's way than with Reymond's and White's.

The author begins by taking seriously—even giving some ground to—Eduard Schweizer's judgment: “There is no such thing as the New Testament church order” (p. 1). Although Akin does not agree with Schweizer, he takes the point. He agrees that almost every polity, from prelatical to Quaker, finds some support in Scripture.

The point is that all believers have equal standing before God, and therefore a Congregational form of government is indicated. The purpose of the single elder, advised by a board or council, is to embody church discipline. Thus, the “wisdom of strong pastoral leadership and appropriate congregational involvement.”

Akin is thorough in his exegesis of the many New Testament texts. He makes a lot less of Acts 15 than Reymond. He is agreed, however, with the others that church discipline is a mark of the church. There he parts company, as do almost all our authors, with Luther and the Anglicans, who observed that the marks of the church are only two: the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the two gospel sacraments. It becomes clear to me that to Christians for whom visible church discipline is important, polity becomes inflated in value. This is because polity determines the form of discipline. For *bene esse* Episcopalians and for most Lutherans, discipline “happens”—it is not a matter of constraint—when the Word is trumpeted. We trust the Spirit to bring about discipline, at least in most cases. You could almost say, we trust the Spirit to execute judgment so long as the gospel is being enunciated clearly.

On the other hand, if godly discipline is a human function, then it becomes crucial how it is administered. This is why Dr. Akin takes church government so seriously. I myself incline almost to an adiaphorist position in relation to polity. I could see myself joining happily in an (open) Brethren fellowship—if they would have me—or in an evangelical congregational model, such as the thriving First Church in Wethersfield, Connecticut—or in a Pentecostal Anglican setup such as Holy Trinity, Brompton in London. I trust the Holy Spirit to separate the wheat from the chaff, provided that the authentic gospel is being offered week in and week out from the pulpit.

Dr. Akin puts to bed forever the “pipeline” theory of apostolic succession, the doctrine of succession by ordination. Well done! He also emphasizes, and strongly so, the priesthood of all believers. He summarizes his position thus: “The fact that Congregationalism undergirds the New Testament pattern of church government prevents churches past or present from being locked into some type of ecclesiastical straitjacket. It would seem that the Episcopal and

Presbyterian forms of church government would be more susceptible to this danger.…Representative Congregationalism is biblically defensible." Right on all counts!

Akin proceeds to focus on the qualifications of the single elder. This is all to the good. The New Testament gives us accessible and clear guidelines for a man's call to ordained ministry: what is required in terms of character, background, and moral existence. The author argues that all will be well if the local church is able to call the rightly qualified person. Spiritual integrity is the driving issue. I am impressed that Akin quotes Cotton Mather on the humanity of ministers in the context, even so, of a supremely high call: "The office of the Christian ministry, rightly understood, is the honorable and most important, that any man in the whole world can ever sustain; and it will be one of the wonders and employments of eternity to consider the reasons why the wisdom and goodness of God assigned this office to imperfect and guilty man!"

In all these essays, including my own, I fail to see a strong enough nod to the fluid and free-floating gifts of the Holy Spirit. Whether it is character which is emphasized, or the right number of elders, or the "connectionalism," the Pentecostal dimension seems lacking. I am not talking anarchy and Corinth. I am talking the flexibility of the Pauline churches. I fear that the models given here may be on the static side. Is there enough room for initiative and creativity for the sake of mission?

Dr. Akin strengthens his content-rich essay with a brief history of Baptist church order in the United States. I found this informative and in some cases moving. He then concludes the piece quite humbly, admitting that a plurality of elders in the local congregation is also grounded in New Testament texts. Akin does not wish to universalize his Baptist position. "I believe that the New Testament allows such flexibility in church polity." This I can swallow. It makes me want to meet the man and go to church with him.

Response by James Leo Garrett, Jr.

I agree with Dr. Akin (contra Eduard Schweizer, Paul Zahl) that "the New Testament does not provide a precise manual" on church government but does provide "definite patterns and discernable guidelines." I further agree that "New Testament churches were basically Congregational." I prefer, however, to differentiate papal polity from episcopal polity because the former has one supreme, universal *episkopos,* and I would point out that the Erastian model has little relevance in North America.

Dr. Akin and I are also in agreement that there are significant New Testament texts that support Congregational polity. In addition to the six texts which I examined in detail, Dr. Akin has dealt with Acts 11:22; 14:27; 2 Corinthians 6; 1 Corinthians 7–12; and 1 Corinthians 16:3–4. I am indeed willing to reckon these as relevant to the discussion concerning polity, if in some cases on a secondary level.

I have no reason to disagree with what Dr. Akin has written on the "recipients of New Testament epistles," "responsibility for doctrine and practice," the "cessation of the apostolic office," and "church order and unity." I also agree with him that the priesthood of all Christians is supportive of Congregational polity.

But I have a problem with Dr. Akin's focus (or fixation?) on the priesthood of all Christians as a controversial issue in the Southern Baptist Convention during 1988–89, although he does allude to Martin Luther. A much more expansive perspective is needed. Attention needs to be given to the New Testament texts (1 Pet. 2:4–10; Rev. 1:5b–6; 5:9–10; 20:6) and to the relationship between such priesthood and the offering of spiritual sacrifices.[88] Recognition needs to be given as to how Baptists, especially Southern Baptists, interpreted this doctrine during the twentieth century. Such a study will show how unhindered access to God for the individual tended to obscure any collective service or ministry until the access view was challenged toward the end of the century.[89] A more balanced and biblically rooted doctrine of the priesthood of all Christians will be an even greater asset than Dr. Akin has envisioned.

Sola Scriptura, which Dr. Akin recognizes as a battle cry of the Protestant Reformation, is interpreted by him to mean biblical inerrancy and doctrinal accountability, whereas, for Luther, it meant primarily the supreme authority of the Scriptures over all postbiblical traditions (church fathers, creeds, popes) and an ecclesiastical system unwilling to be reformed by the Scriptures as the Word of God, of which Christ is Lord and King and which is to be interpreted by other biblical texts.[90]

Dr. Akin puts more weight upon the *Didache* (*Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*) than I can. First of all, the date of this writing has long been disputed; scholars have attempted to date it at times ranging from AD 50 to the late middle ages.[91] Second, the nature of the *Didache* must be probed. Is it "a picture of the church at the time when it was written, an antiquarian picture of the Church as it

was at some time in the past, or an imaginary [or idealistic?] picture"?[92] If the *Didache* was written later than the writings of Ignatius of Antioch with their espousal of a monarchical episcopate, how persuasive is an argument from the *Didache?*

Again I agree with Dr. Akin (and Robert L. Reymond) that *presbyteros* and *episkopos* were applied to the same officeholder in the New Testament, and I agree with Dr. Akin that there were differences as well as similarities between the elders in the synagogues and in Judaism and the elders in the earliest Christian churches. I further agree that the New Testament texts relative to qualifications of bishops, deacons, and others, deserve careful attention but would insist that they are not decisive in resolving issues of church polity.

Dr. Akin has alluded to the fact that W. B. Johnson, a nineteenth-century Southern Baptist leader, favored plurality of elders and advocated both ruling elders and teaching elders. It may also be noted that in the Philadelphia Association during the eighteenth century Morgan Edwards and others supported the practice of utilizing ruling elders in Baptist churches. Following the research of Charles W. Deweese[93] and of Slayden A. Yarbrough,[94] I would reckon this early American Baptist practice of ruling elders to have been a temporary deviation in Baptist life, partly explainable by Congregational and Presbyterian influences.

I agree with Dr. Akin that the phenomenon of first-century house churches is important to understanding first-century church polity, but I doubt that we can reach undisputed conclusions on this subject. The term "senior pastor" is not only currently "popular" among Baptist churches but also is a recent innovation in Baptist nomenclature. But why must it be identified with the "pastors and teachers" of Ephesians 4:11?

Furthermore, in arguing from Jethro and Moses, Dr. Akin departs from the common Baptist position that ecclesiology should be built primarily on the New Testament.

My most basic difference with Dr. Akin is that in his advocacy of single-elder-led polity he has manifested a genuine mistrust of the members of local Baptist churches as to their capacity to seek, discern, and follow the will of God under the Spirit of God in decision-making. Admittedly he does reject "a dictatorial, autocratic, CEO model" for Baptist pastors. But he wishes to reduce congregational meetings to one per year, except in emergencies, and to "leave the everyday affairs of church life" in the "hands" of church leaders.

The founding fathers of the U.S. government, in framing the Tenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, specified that all the powers not specifically delegated to the federal government should be retained by the several states. Dr. Akin has reversed this pattern in what he envisions for Baptist churches. Certain specified powers are to be granted to the congregation (calling and ordination of pastor and staff members, purchase of property and construction of buildings, cases of church discipline), and then all other powers are to be retained by the pastor and the employed ministerial staff. This "representative model" is not true Congre-gationalism but a new form of the elder system centering in preaching-teaching-administering elders (at least in larger churches), of whom one is senior.

Congregational polity is fully congruent with effective pastoral leadership of a servant type wherein mutual trust, mutual accountability, and Christian love and forbearance are the norm.

Response by Robert L. Reymond

Daniel Akin has written a very fine essay on the Congregational model functioning under the governance of a single elder assisted by deacons. He argues his case not because he believes it is the only model of congregational polity that Scripture will allow, for he believes that Scripture is flexible in this regard and allows as well for a Congregationalism with a plurality of elders. Rather, he argues for this model of Congregationalism both because he accepted the editors' assignment to defend this position and because he believes that "it is an acceptable and biblically defensible position." He begins his assignment by defining what he means by *Congregationalism:* "Congregationalism locates the authority of the church in each local body of believers. No person or organization is above or over it except the Lord Jesus Christ as its head."

Citing Robert Saucy, Akin emphasizes that Congregationalism is "democratic" with each and every member of a given congregation having equal rights and responsibilities. He then advances his argument by setting forth the evidence for Congregationalism *per se.* Interestingly, he employs most if not all of the same texts that Garrett employs in his essay, namely, Matthew 18:15–17; Acts 6:1–7; Acts 15:22; 1 Corinthians 5:2–4; and 2 Corinthians 2:6. Inasmuch as I do not want to "recreate the wheel" for my reader here and burden him unnecessarily by repeating my earlier rejoinders, I will refer him to my treatment of these texts in my response to Garrett's essay.

Akin employs five text, however, that Garrett does not expound (though he

does include one of them, 1 Corinthians 16:3–4, in his category of “other possible texts”). These five are Acts 11:22; 14:27; 1 Corinthians 6:1; 1 Corinthians 7; and 1 Corinthians 16:3–4. I think I should say something about these texts lest Akin should feel I am completely neglecting or ignoring him.

With regard to Acts 11:22, Akin concludes from the fact that the text states, “The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch,” that Barnabas “was not sent by the apostles or the elders only. The clear indication is that the *congregation as a whole* sent him” (emphasis added). I know I am going to sound like a broken record in my responses when I say what I do, but Akin's conclusion does not follow by logical necessity from his premise. I doubt very seriously whether the entire church in Jerusalem, which numbered in the thousands by this time, was polled to see what it thought about Barnabas's assignment.

This highlights again the problem that arises when one is considering such a phrase as “the church in Jerusalem.” Does it refer to one small local house church or to a large house church or collectively to all of the house churches in a given region or to the leadership of the churches in that region? It seems reasonable, at least to me, to conclude that the *leaders* of the church at Jerusalem, representing the many house churches in the city, assigned Barnabas his task. Of course, I do not know this for certain—the text does not provide enough information here—so I will not claim this text for Presbyterian polity. But I do not think that the Congregationalist should claim this text for his polity either.

With regard to Acts 14:27, the same response is in order. It is true that the text states that when Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch at the end of their first missionary effort “they gathered the church together and declared all that God had done with them.” When Akin states, “Their report was evidently not to the leadership only, but to the entire congregation,” he states more than he can possibly know for sure. Since Christians numbered in the hundreds, if not in the thousands, by this time also in Antioch, it is highly unlikely that “the church” referred to one congregation or that this one “entire congregation,” given its numbers, was gathered in one place. Much more likely the leaders of the many house churches came together to hear their missionaries' report.

If anyone should be able to understand how the Scriptures might use “church” as shorthand for “*representatives* of the church,” it should be the American Christian who lives under a system of government that was modeled on Presbyterian representative republicanism.[95] When he is informed that the

“United States did such and such,” he immediately knows that not every person in the United States necessarily did such and such. He knows that the statement refers most naturally to the United States government. Indeed, he knows more specifically that the statement refers, if not to both, either to the President or to a majority of the United States Congress. I would urge that we theologians must wean ourselves away from reading Scripture texts in an unnatural, wooden, literalistic way.

This is often done, to cite just one example, with respect to the New Testament word *Israel*. What does *Israel* mean? I remember being informed once by a leading dispensational scholar that *Israel* just means “Israel.” I asked him: “What then did Paul mean when he said in Romans 9:6: ‘They are not all Israel that are of Israel’?” (NKJV). Clearly, Paul is using the word *Israel* in two different senses, the former referring to the elect remnant in Israel, the latter to racial Israel. I am not sure he ever saw my point. If he did not, that is too bad; for if he did not, he doomed himself to a perpetual misreading of the biblical text in a hundred different ways. Akin, of course, knows this, I am sure, so I do not want him to think for a moment that I am lecturing him. I am simply cautioning us all to be very diligent not to draw conclusions from a given text that the text simply cannot support exegetically.

With regard to 1 Corinthians 6:1, when Akin concludes from the fact that Paul wants the Christian who has a legal grievance against a brother to take his grievance not to the unrighteous but to “the saints,” that the referent of “saints” here is the “entire body” of the church (“the body of believers as a whole”) and not “a presbytery, assembly, synod, board of elders, pastor, group of deacons or a church committee,” again I think he is drawing an inference that burdens the text with a weight that it is not prepared to carry. In the very next verse (6:2) the same word refers to the *entire* body of Christ in the world. Are we to believe that Paul wanted the aggrieved brother to take his suit to the entire body of Christ? Of course not! The “saints” of verse 1 are only a part of the “saints” of verse 2. Could not a part, then, of the “saints” of verse 1—that is, perhaps a presbytery, a board of elders, a group of deacons, or a church committee—fully satisfy Paul's instructions to the aggrieved brother? I think so. Accordingly, I see no mandate in Paul's instructions that the entire church must adjudicate the lawsuit. You want to talk about a situation that is scary? That would be it!

On the basis of the material in 1 Corinthians 7, Akin declares: “The letter was received by Paul as coming from the church as a whole. It was not said to have come from the leadership. It was sent by *the entire body of believers* residing in Corinth.” I doubt this seriously. As every New Testament scholar

knows, the normative epistolary style of the period placed the letter writer's name at the beginning of his letter. Is Akin asking me to believe that the letter from Corinth to Paul began with a complete list of the names of every member of the Corinthian church? I hope not. My comments here are not intended in any way to embarrass Akin; they are intended only to highlight how easy it is for someone to ridicule a conclusion that infers more than a text actually says. Would it not be much more reasonable to believe that a letter from the Corinthian church to Paul would have been posted to him from the church's leadership who represented and spoke in the name of the church? Enough said.

Regarding 1 Corinthians 16:3 (which Garrett, the reader may recall, believed at best only *implied* a Congregational polity), I must draw the same conclusion here that I just drew about 1 Corinthians 7. The mere fact that Paul states, "I will send those whom you accredit by letter" (RSV, but the word translated "letter," *epistolon*, is actually in the plural; therefore, Gordon D. Fee translates: "I [Paul] will give letters of introduction"[96]) hardly means that Paul was requiring of the Corinthian church letters from every member of the church. Much more likely, if the RSV rendering is correct, a letter bearing the names of the church's leaders would have satisfied his request. If Fee's translation is correct, which is more probably the case, the passage still does not preclude a representative form of church government since the text is silent with respect to who specifically did the accrediting. In light of Acts 11:30, where it is stated that the elders of the church handled the church's money matters, it was most likely the elders here who selected and accredited those who would accompany the Corinthian church's money gift to the church at Jerusalem.

I have now responded to every text that Garrett and Akin advanced in their essays as the biblical ground for Congregational polity. I must conclude that not one of them does so unequivocally; indeed, I have suggested that virtually all of them more naturally reflect in their textual and historical contexts the presence of some kind of representative government at work.

Akin now draws our attention to what he designates "Theological Considerations" in favor of Congregationalism. Here again I find his conclusions wanting, and for the following reasons:

First, the fact that "the overwhelming majority of the New Testament letters were written to church congregations" means nothing in itself regarding church polity. But when he then writes: "In fact not one letter is addressed to a bishop, elder, etc.," I must, to say no more, simply demur. What in the name of truth was Timothy? What was Titus? Just "apostolic representatives," as Akin states?

Hardly, for we know that Timothy had been ordained to the gospel ministry (1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6) and was therefore an elder. We may assume the same about Titus since Paul authorizes him to “appoint elders in every city” (Titus 1:6).

Second, the fact that “the entire church” is held responsible for maintaining true doctrine and practice says nothing explicitly about a particular form of church polity. The verses he cites in this connection may mean much; they may mean little in this connection.

Third, while I concur with Akin that the apostolic office died with the death of the last apostle and that the notion of apostolic succession must therefore be rejected, these facts say nothing explicit about the form of church government that ensued after their passing. Because of the teaching of the pastoral Epistles regarding the office of the elder, I would submit that the most likely form that ensued after the passing of the apostles was representative Presbyterianism.

Fourth, the fact that the church is the body of Christ, which means that each member of the church must acknowledge the interconnectedness between himself and every other believer, in my opinion, should sound the death knell to all talk of local church autonomy and independency in the church, so I fail to understand precisely what Akin's point is when he highlights the significance of church unity for Congregationalism.

Fifth and finally, I agree with Akin that the Reformation doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers,” which he declares is “one of the more important defenses for Congregational polity,” has more to do with service for others than with the individual's position or standing before God. But how this fact allows him to conclude that this meant for the Reformers that the priesthood they had in mind is “a band of faithful believers united in a common confession as a *local, visible congregatio sanctorum*” (emphasis of first two words added) is beyond me. If they intended anything, they intended the doctrine to point toward some type of universal connectionalism.

Akin now concludes from his completed survey of selected Scripture texts and selected “theological considerations” that they all “reveal a consistent, overarching pattern of Congregational church government and polity.” I can only respond by saying to anyone who agrees with him that they should go back and read again my essay and my two responses to Garrett and to Akin. If, after they do so, they are still convinced that he is right, I simply have nothing more to say.

Because I am running out of the allotted space for this response, I can only say a word about Akin's defense of a single-elder model of congregationalism.

With Akin I agree that the argument for a plurality of elders in a local congregation “is easier to make based upon the biblical evidence” (see my essay in this connection as well as the second edition of my *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 906–907). For me the biblical evidence settles the issue: local churches should be governed by a plurality of elders. Interestingly, Akin acknowledges that “congregationalism often is best practiced in the form of a representative model.”

I want to say in closing how much I appreciated the pastoral tone of Akin's essay. His passion and love for Christ's church were evident on every page. I would enjoy interacting with him, as well as with the other essayists, on this topic again some time.

Response by James R. White

Daniel Akin has written, “Finally, I could personally pastor a church with an official plurality of elders, a church where there are co-pastors, or a church where there is a single pastor. Why? Because quite simply, I believe that the New Testament allows such flexibility in church polity.”

A large portion of this presentation mirrors my own, especially in regards to the independence of the local congregations, the qualification of elders, and the like. With reference to those specific aspects of Congregationalism that I feel miss the biblical emphasis upon the divine nature of the order of the church (and the offices ordained of God), I refer the reader to my brief comments in response to the chapter on strict Congregationalism. In his essay, Dr. Akin is arguing that the single-pastor model *can* be used, though he does seem to recognize the preponderance of evidence in favor of a plurality of elders. The assertion is made that the New Testament allows freedom in the matter.

Are there situations in which a church might have a single elder? Surely. Death may reduce a plurality to a singularity, but it would be the goal of the church to restore the plurality, perhaps through the aid of a sister church that still has a plurality, or most naturally, from within the congregation itself.

Is the extent of the plurality, i.e., the number of elders beyond two, a relevant consideration? I do not believe so. The point is mutual accountability, encouragement, and leadership. This can take place in a small congregation with two, or in a large congregation with fifty.

But is having a plurality of elders merely a matter of freedom? I do not believe so. The mutual accountability and equality inherent in the plurality of elders ordained by the apostles is an important safeguard provided by the Holy

Spirit in Scripture and in practice as well. Plurality of eldership functions as a restraint upon the very impulses toward autocracy that mark so many single-elder churches in our day. We have all heard the horror stories about the man who becomes isolated on the proverbial island, separated from the people of the church, afraid and threatened, and the carnage that can result from such a situation in the church. I have observed it myself.

One concept that is presented that I would like to comment on is derived from Ephesians 4:11 and the idea of the pastor/teacher. Surely there may well be one elder who does the majority of the teaching/preaching within a plurality of elders model. But I think it is important to note that when Paul speaks of the elders/ presbyters "shepherding" the flock of God that is entrusted to them (Acts 20:28), and when he likewise makes "able to teach" a part of the qualifications of that same office (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9), this would indicate that pastoring/teaching is, for the apostle, part of the essential ministry of the elder/overseer. Some may have greater gifts than others in specific areas, but all must meet the qualifications provided in Scripture itself.

So the main issue between the view presented here and my own would come down to the biblical emphasis upon the "setting in order" of the church through the appointment of a plurality of elders in the church. I do not see this as something that is merely a matter of freedom, or a situation where it is "better" to have a plurality, "but not something to be concerned about." A local assembly with a single leader is functioning *below* the level provided by Christ for his church. No one single man was gifted or called to bear the responsibilities inherent in Hebrews 13:17 alone. It is a burden to be borne by more than one.

CHAPTER 2

The Presbytery-Led Church

Presbyterian Church Government

ROBERT L. REYMOND

Introduction

Jesus Christ, as king and head of his church, has given to his people all the oracles, ordinances, and officers necessary for their edification and maturation in this world. In his messianic role as king, from his throne of glory he rules and teaches his people by his Word and Spirit through the oversight ministry of these officers. Moreover, he has ordained for his church, in order that all things might be done decently and in order therein, a system of government, the details of which are either expressly set forth in Scripture or may be deduced therefrom by good and necessary inference.

Although this can be demonstrated from Holy Scripture, it has become commonplace today in many church circles to say that Scripture requires no particular form of church government. The form a given church employs, many evangelicals say, may be determined on an *ad hoc* or pragmatic basis. Whatever works at any given time in any given place is allowable as long as it promotes peace and doctrinal purity in the church. George W. Knight III observes in this regard:

> We live among general evangelicals who say that [the determination of which church government the New Testament endorses] is difficult, if not impossible, because the New Testament displays a great variety of forms of church government. These general evangelicals contend that God has not given nor established any one form of church government but rather has left the church in various places to develop that form which best suits its situation.[1]

At least some “general evangelicals” employ the argument that because the

New Testament letters are *ad hoc* documents written to churches or individuals in the New Testament era, we should not feel that we are under obligation to follow the New Testament's instruction today with respect to what they teach regarding church government.[2] This view unwittingly calls into question the great Protestant doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture alone in matters of both faith and practice. This last observation requires some comment.

The Sufficiency of Scripture for Church Government

George W. Knight III, in his presidential address "The Scriptures Were Written for Our Instruction," responded to this contention before the Evangelical Theological Society in November 1995.[3] He argued, and I think his argument is conclusive, that *despite the "occasional" or* ad hoc *character of its many literary parts, the Scripture's own doctrine of Scripture binds us to view its teachings as truths intended today "for* our *instruction, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness."* Not only is this a fair inference from such great passages as 2 Timothy 3:16–17, but Paul also states this truth quite plainly in several places:

> The words "it was credited to him" were written not for [Abraham] alone, *but also for us* [*alla kai di' hemas*], to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead (Rom. 4:23–24).
>
> For *everything that was written in the past* [*hosa proegraphe*] was written *to teach us* [*eis ten hemeteran didaskalian*], so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope (Rom. 15:4).
>
> For it is written in the Law of Moses: 'Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.' Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this *for us* [*di' hemas*], doesn't he? Yes, *this was written for us* [*di' hemas egraphe*] (1 Cor. 9:9–10).
>
> Now these things occurred [to them] as examples to keep *us* from setting *our* hearts on evil things as they did.…These things happened to them as examples and *were written down as warnings for us* [*egraphe pros nouthesian hemon*], on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come (1 Cor. 10:6, 11).

What is so striking and instructive about Paul's understanding that the Old

Testament Scriptures were written for *our* instruction is that in his use of these very Scriptures, as Knight notes:

> He writes almost as if there were no gap at all between the Scriptures written years before and the "us" for whom they are written as instruction, or as if the analogy and similarities are so great that the gap is thus thereby not only easily bridged but intended by God to be bridged for he had us also in mind when they were written. This is particularly relevant in that most of the passages are used to urge the appropriate conduct that the Scriptures have indicated. [Paul recognizes that the types and shadows of the ceremonial law and the Jewish theocratic entity have respectively been fulfilled and removed with the first advent of Christ.] But in no case does he write about conduct in the realm of morality and say or imply that the Scriptures were not in that case written for our instruction.
>
> Since this principle is true of the OT Scriptures written before the end of the ages has come, how much more is it true of the NT Scriptures written in the period of the end of the ages in which we today and they who originally received it both live! Since the ethical instruction has bridged that most significant gap between the OT and the NT and applies to us, certainly where there is no real gap of religious moment between us and the NT church we should expect an even more direct correlation between the NT teachings and ourselves. We will not need to argue, as Paul did in 1 Corinthians 10, the analogies between the OT ceremonies and situations and ours, for they will not be ones of analogy but of identity in the religious realm.[4]

Paul's explicit assertion that the Scriptures were written for our instruction means then that, while we must distinguish admonitions that are culturally conditioned, such as "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (Rom. 16:16), from those that are not so conditioned in their application, we must resist permitting these *ad hoc* cultural differences that exist between the New Testament world and our own to nullify any and all direct application of the Scripture's instruction to us. Therefore, "if Paul can say of the Old Testament scriptures that 'everything that was written in the past was written to teach us' (Rom. 15:4), *how much more so is it true that the principal instruction that the apostle gives concerning church government in the New Testament applies to us.*"[5] And as we shall argue, the New Testament and particularly the pastoral Epistles[6] are replete with instructions for both church officers and the churches they oversee regarding both how the elder/overseer is to "take care of [*epimelesetai*] the

church of God” (1 Tim. 3:5), and “how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:14–15), which is just to say that the Christian Scriptures teach us much about church government.

And as we shall see shortly, our Presbyterian forefathers, taking the sufficiency of Holy Scripture seriously with respect to church government, appealed to Holy Scripture alone for the substance of their *Books of Church Order* (*BCO*s). They perceived clearly that to believe that the Word of God is insufficient in its instruction for ordering the church's government and affairs is, first, to imply that Christ is not adequately or effectively ruling over and guiding his church, second, to overturn Christ's unique and absolute headship over his church, and thereby, third, to open the door for men to substitute their wills and desires as the standard of what should be ordered and done in Christ's church—a substitution that has been made all too often throughout church history. The church of Jesus Christ would do well in any age to keep in mind John Murray's admonition respecting this very important matter:

> The church is the church of God and of Christ, and its aims and functions are prescribed by its head, its constitution determined and its officers designated and appointed by him.
>
> Perhaps no doctrine of the New Testament offers more sanctity to this fact than that the church is the body of Christ which he has purchased with his own blood. That which elders or bishops rule is the blood-purchased possession of Christ, that which cost the agony of Gethsemane and the blood of Calvary's accursed tree. It was that which was captive to sin, Satan, and death, and Christ redeemed it as his own precious possession. It is now his body, and he is the head. *How shall we dare to handle that body, how shall we dare to direct its affairs, except as we can plead the authority of Christ.* The church as the body of Christ is not to be ruled according to human wisdom and expediency but according to the prescriptions of him in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.[7]

The Etymologies and Usages of Presbyteros and Episkopos

The word *Presbyterian* is related etymologically to the two Greek words, *presbyteros* (occurs sixty-six times in the Greek New Testament), which simply means “old(er) man” in some contexts (Luke 15:25; John 8:9; 1 Tim. 5:1) but in

other contexts—those that presently concern us—means “elder” in the sense of an office holder[8] (*among the Jews*, members of the Sanhedrin, Matt. 16:21; 21:23; 26:3, 47; 27:1, 3, 12, 20, 41; 26:57; 28:12; Mark 8:31; 11:27; 14:43, 53; 15:1; Luke 9:22; 20:1; 22:52; Acts 4:23; 6:12; 23:14; 25:15; *among Christians*, officers of the church, Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Tim. 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1, 5 [perhaps 2 John 1 and 3 John 1]); and *presbyterion* (occurs three times in the Greek New Testament: Luke 22:66; Acts 22:5; 1 Tim. 4:14), which means “body [or “council”] of elders.”[9] That the Greek word *episkopos* (occurs five times in the Greek New Testament: Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 2:25),[10] meaning “overseer” but often transliterated as “bishop,” is not a designation of a different office from that of the elder but rather a descriptive synonym designating a function for the same office holder is made plain from Paul's intertwining usages of the words. To the elders (*tous presbyterous*) of the church of Ephesus whom he had summoned to Miletus (Acts 20:17), Paul said: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [*episkopous*]” (Acts 20:28 NKJV).[11]

Virtually the same list of qualifications that Paul gives in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 for the overseer (see 3:2: *episkopon*) he gives in Titus 1:5–9 for the elder (see 1:5: *presbyterous*) (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9). When Paul described to Titus the qualifications for the elder he employed the word *overseer* in his description of those qualifications: “The reason I left you in Crete was that you might…appoint [ordain] elders [1:5; note the plural *presbyterous*] in every city.[12] …Since an overseer [1:7: *episkopon*] is entrusted with God's work, he must be blameless (Titus 1:5–7). When writing to the Philippian church, Paul addresses his letter to “all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers [*episkopois*] and deacons [*diakonois*].” Here Paul refers to two church offices, *both* in the plural, and by the word *overseers* he quite clearly intends *elders* since the eldership/overseership is the only office other than deacon concerning which he gives any significant instruction (compare 1 Tim. 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9). Furthermore, if Paul did not intend to refer to elders when he employed the word *episkopois*, then he failed to address the elders at all in his salutation to the church in Philippi, which would have been a serious oversight on his part (Phil. 1:1).

Beyond dispute, for Paul the elder was an overseer and the overseer was an elder.[13] The two terms simply describe two roles of the same officeholder: as an elder this officer exercises authority; as an overseer this same officer performs

the functional role of spiritual supervision and oversight. J. B. Lightfoot declares in his famous study: “It is a fact now generally recognized by theologians of all shades of opinion, that in the language of the New Testament the same officer in the Church is called indifferently ‘bishop’ (*episkopos*) and ‘elder’ or ‘presbyter’ (*presbyteros*).”[14] This means that scriptural church government is both “Presbyterian” and “Episcopal.” But because these terms clearly describe the same officeholder, the latter term must not be associated with the hierarchical meaning that has come to be attached to it in the course of church history but rather must be viewed simply as a term descriptive of the elder's function. *Scripture knows nothing of the governmental church polity of a hierarchical episcopacy*, and if the church has an archbishop (or “arch-elder”), that archbishop is Jesus Christ!

I do not intend to suggest for a moment that there is unanimity of scholarly opinion on the specific form of church government that the New Testament prescribes. The simple fact that this chapter appears in this particular book is sufficient evidence of this. And anyone who knows anything at all about church history will know that at least four distinguishable forms of church government have been proposed: the Presbyterian form, the Episcopal form in its Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican variations, the Congregational form in its several variations (single-elder-led Congregationalism, plural-elder-led Congregationalism, and democratic Congregationalism), and the Erastian form in its several state-church variations. Is one of these forms the biblical form, and if so, which one?

This chapter will attempt to demonstrate that the Presbyterian form of church government alone passes biblical muster—that is, governance of the church by elders/overseers in graded courts, with these officers executing the responsibilities of their office in unison and on a parity with each other, and with the material care and service of the church being looked after by deacons (known corporately as the “diaconate”) under the supervision of the elders/overseers.

Governance by Elders/Overseers

Presbyterianism (governance by elders/overseers) has a long history in the Bible. Moses, the priests and Levites, the judges, and even the kings of Israel, were all assisted in their governance of the Israelites, with God's permission, by the “elders of Israel” or most strikingly “the elders of the congregation” (Exod.

3:16, 18; 4:29; 17:5–6; 18:13–27; 19:7; 24:1, 9–11; Lev. 4:4:15; 9:1–2; Num. 11:14–25; Deut. 5:23; 22:15–17; 27:1; Josh. 7:6; 8:33; Judg. 21:16; 1 Kings 8:1–3; 1 Chron. 21:16; Ps. 107:32; Ezek. 8:1, etc.).

This practice of governance by elders continued within Israel into the New Testament era as is evident both from Luke 22:66 where Luke informs his readers that Jesus was brought before "the *council of the elders* [*presbyterion*] of the people [the Sanhedrin]" and was found guilty of blasphemy and insurrection, and from Acts 22:5 where Paul states that "all the *council of the elders* [presbyterion]" authorized him to seize Christians for trial and death—certainly not two of the moral high points in Presbyterian history, illustrating that councils of elders can err, badly at times.

Unquestionably, it was this practice of governance by elders, begun by and present within Israel from the days of Mosaism onward, that by the Holy Spirit's direction lay behind the practice of Barnabas and Paul, wherever they planted churches, of "ordaining"[15] a *plurality* of elders "in every church" (*kat' ekklesian*) (Acts 14:23) to govern and to oversee it in accordance with the Word of God (to the extent that a given church possessed it or a portion of it). Paul would later instruct Titus to appoint[16] or ordain elders "in every city" (*kata polin*) (Titus 1:5). Then, with the passing of the apostles from the scene, the churches were to continue to be governed by councils of elders/overseers chosen by the congregation, as the verb *cheirotoneo* ("elect by raised hands") shows and as Paul's lists of qualifications for the elders/overseers in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 imply.

But while it is the congregation that elects its elders/overseers, Presbyterians believe that the congregation, as it prayerfully elects these elders/overseers in view of the gifts and graces with which the Holy Spirit has endowed them, must recognize as it does so that their officers' election is Christ's will and that in the final analysis, as Paul states in Acts 20:28, it is the Holy Spirit who is placing these men in the office of elder/overseer. Thus, "in choosing officers, the church does not grant them authority, but recognizes Christ's authority and calling."[17] L. Berkhof writes in this regard:

> The officers of the Church are the representatives of the people chosen by popular vote. This does not mean, however, that they receive their authority from the people, for the call of the people is but the confirmation of the inner call by the Lord Himself [evidenced by the candidate first "desiring" the office and then meeting the qualifications of the elder/overseer prescribed in 1 Timothy 3:1–7]; and it is from Him that they

> receive their authority and to Him they are responsible. When they are called representatives, this is merely an indication of the fact that they were chosen to their office by the people, and does not imply that they derive their authority from them. Hence they are no deputies or tools that merely serve to carry out the wishes of the people, but rulers whose duty it is to apprehend and apply intelligently the laws of Christ.[18]

This is just to say that the local congregation elects men to hold the office of elder/overseer that carries within its bosom the intrinsic authority invested by Christ himself. Accordingly, the congregation must recognize that the church is *not* a pure democracy: the elders/overseers, once elected, do not hold their office simply to carry out the congregation's will. They are to rule and to oversee the congregation, not primarily in agreement with the will of the congregation but primarily in agreement with the revealed Word of God, in accordance with the authority delegated to them by Christ, the head of the church. From just this much data it is fair and safe to conclude that particular Christian churches are to be governed by spiritually qualified councils of elders/overseers who are to be chosen by the people and who are then to oversee their congregations according to the precepts of God's written revelation.[19]

Ecclesiastical "Connectionalism"

Beyond this, Presbyterians urge that the New Testament provides the schematic for their governmental "connectionalism;" that is to say, they urge that the New Testament teaches in broad outline that the churches of the apostolic age were bound together by a connectional government of graded courts (local "session," regional "presbytery," "general assembly") reflecting mutual accountability, dependency, and submission among them. They urge this on the following four grounds.

The Presence of "Connectional" Courts

Presbyterians urge that there is clear evidence that the elders/ overseers of local churches in a given locality acted in concert with each other in the same way that area or regional presbyteries of Presbyterian church bodies act today. I will give two examples. First, the presence of *many* (*pollon*) teachers and preachers in Antioch (Acts 13:1–3; 15:35) by around AD 49–50 explains why "the Christian community in Antioch quickly became a metropolitan church rivaling in size the church of Jerusalem."[20] These two facts (the many preachers,

the large number of Christians) in turn imply that there were doubtless *many* local congregations of Christians at Antioch, each of which would have had its own council of elders/ overseers. Luke informs us that while these men (he names five of them: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Paul) were worshipping the Lord and fasting together, the Holy Spirit instructed them to set Barnabas and Paul apart for missionary labor, which they did through a commissioning service involving the laying on of hands (Acts 15:3).

This situation strongly suggests that the elders/overseers of the Antioch congregations had formed themselves into a local presbytery (the Antioch "council of elders/overseers"; more on this presbytery later). Second, the presence of another area presbytery may be found in the church at Jerusalem itself. By the time of the Acts 15 assembly (AD 50), which I will discuss shortly, there were doubtless thousands of Christian Jews living in Jerusalem (see Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7; see also 21:20). Reason would dictate that these Christians would not have been members of one congregation but rather members of *many* congregations, each of which would have had its own elders/overseers.[21] These elders/overseers acted in concert under the name of "the church" of Jerusalem (Acts 15:4) when the exigencies of Acts 15 came before them. We see again local elders/overseers acting together in a connectional manner the same way that presbyteries of Presbyterian church bodies act today.

A primary text in demonstrating the connectional nature of the early church, of course, is Acts 15 in which Luke records the proceedings of the Jerusalem assembly. Because this event is critically important as a major scriptural ground for the connectionalism of Presbyterianism, I must make more than a simple passing reference to this assembly and its work.[22]

The Assembly's Occasion

During Paul's and Barnabas's stay at Syrian Antioch after their first missionary journey, "some men came down from [the hill country of] Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses,[23] you cannot be saved'" (Acts 15:1). If these are the "certain men from James" in Galatians 2:12, as they most likely are, and if these Judaizers at Antioch are those to whom Paul refers when he declares that "some *false* brothers [*pseudadelphous*] had infiltrated our ranks [in Antioch] to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves" (Gal. 2:4), as

they most likely are, then it is clear that they had gone beyond their commission in what they were teaching (see Acts 15:24: “with words which we did not authorize”).

The coming of these “certain men from James” is also quite likely the same occasion when Peter, having come to Antioch before these Judaizers “from James” arrived and having enjoyed table fellowship for a time with the Gentile Christians in the Antioch church as he had enjoyed table fellowship with Cornelius and his household earlier at Caesarea (Acts 10:48), in an act which Paul describes by the strong word *hypokrisis* (“hypocrisy, insincerity”), and also as “not acting in line with the truth of the gospel” “drew back and separated himself” from their fellowship when the Judaizers arrived “because he was fearing those who belonged to the circumcision party.” By his example he led other Jews, including even Barnabas, also astray (Gal. 2:11–13).

It should not go unnoticed that Paul employs the phrase, “the truth of the gospel,” twice in the Galatians 2 passage, the first time in connection with his confrontation with the “false brothers” (“We did not give in to them for a moment, so that *the truth of the gospel* might remain with you [Galatians],” 2:5), the second time in connection with his confrontation with Cephas (“When I saw that they [Cephas, Barnabas, and the other Jews] were not acting in line with *the truth of the gospel,* I said to Peter in front of them all,” 2:14). This connection suggests that Cephas and those under his influence were *acting* in this situation *as if* they were “false brothers.” We know, of course, that Cephas believed better than he acted, which is the reason Paul described his actions as “hypocrisy” or “insincerity” and not as an act of apostasy (*apostasia*) or “departure from the faith.”

Because of the intense debate that arose between the Judaizers and Paul and Barnabas, “the church” (Acts 15:3) at Antioch (that is, the Antioch presbytery representing several congregations) decided to send Paul and Barnabas up to Jerusalem to confer with the apostles and elders there (that is, the Jerusalem presbytery) in a “general assembly” and officially to settle this matter once and for all. On their way south and up to Jerusalem, as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria—never a pair to fail to seize an opportunity that presented itself—Paul and Barnabas told the brotherhood along the way how God had been converting the Gentiles, which news made the brotherhood very glad (Acts 15:3).

From just this much coverage of the occasion behind the Jerusalem assembly, it is clear that the issue that the Judaizers were raising by their

teaching at Antioch was not simply whether Gentiles could be saved or not. The Old Testament prophets had foretold the salvation of the nations, and all parties to the dispute agreed that they could be (see the church's judgment in Acts 11:18). The issue more specifically was *what did Gentiles have to do in order to be saved and thus to become members of the Christian church?*

The Assembly's Proceedings

There were at least two clearly distinguishable theological positions present at the Jerusalem assembly: first, the Antioch group represented by Paul and Barnabas—and not without some earlier wavering on the latter's part (see Gal. 2:13: "even Barnabas *was led astray* [*sunapechthe*]")—was insisting *on biblical and experiential grounds*[24] that God was justifying Gentiles by grace alone through faith alone in Christ completely apart from circumcision and the other works of the law (see Acts 13:39); second, the legalistic Judaizing group, consisting of "believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees" (Acts 15:5), that is, "the circumcision group" (Gal. 2:12), was insisting just as earnestly *on what it mistakenly believed was biblical grounds* (see their reference to "the custom taught by Moses")[25] that Gentiles had to be circumcised and obey the law of Moses (that is, had in effect to become Jews) in order to be saved.

A third group may well have been present there that would have argued its position *on expediency*, that is to say, on what it would have regarded was a position supportive of the efforts of the Jewish church leadership to evangelize the Jewish populace in Jerusalem and its environs, namely, that Jewish Christians might not want to fraternize with uncircumcised Gentile Christians, at least when non-Christian Jews were present, because of the difficulties such fraternization would create for the Jewish mission efforts among their non-Christian Jewish kinsmen.

Arriving in Jerusalem for what Raymond E. Brown describes as "the most important meeting ever held in the history of Christianity,"[26] Paul and Barnabas "were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them" (Acts 15:4). Immediately the Judaizers stood and raised their objection to Paul's mission theology (15:5). Apparently the meeting went into recess at that time, for Luke informs us that the apostles and elders later "convene…[N.B.] to *consider* the matter" [*Sunechthesan…idein peri tou logou toutou*] (15:6) under the moderatorship of James, the half brother of Jesus.

After "much discussion [or "debate," "controversy," "investigation"]"

(*Polles…zeteseos*) Peter, also having returned to Jerusalem from Antioch and having been convinced by Paul of the error of his actions in Antioch, stood up and addressed the assembly. Expressing what had been his real theological convictions all along (for he was not at heart, at least at that time in his life, a Judaizer), Peter described the soteric significance of his mission to Cornelius in these quite remarkable, even "redeeming," words:

> Brothers, you know that some time ago [it had actually been about ten to twelve years before] God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. *He made no distinction between us and them,* for he purified their hearts by faith. [I think one could justifiably add the word *alone* here in light of Peter's next sentence.] Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke [that is, perfect obedience to both the ceremonial and moral law of Moses] that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe [speaking as an apostle, here Peter enunciates the *original* "Apostles' Creed"] it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that *we [Jews] are saved, just as they [the Gentiles] are* [here is a strategic inversion of subjects—this "we…as they" rather than the "to them…as to us" that he employed earlier in verse 8—for Peter is trying to persuade the Judaizers who were present of God's law-free gospel and thus is addressing this particular statement primarily to them] (Acts 15:7–11).

Barnabas and Paul then told the assembly about the miraculous signs and wonders God had been doing among the Gentiles through them (15:12), which divine wonders would have attested in a probative way to God's approval of their law-free gospel among the Gentiles.

Then, with his authoritative "Brothers, hear me," James began to speak, declaring that the words of the Old Testament prophets "are in agreement with [*symphonousin*]" the missionary activity Peter conducted at Caesarea in connection with Cornelius's conversion and those that Paul and Barnabas had been conducting among the Gentiles. He then cited Amos 9:11–12 as a composite prophetic summary description of what God had declared in Old Testament times that he would do in behalf of the Gentiles in this present age:

> After this I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent [his royal house in the Old Testament, Messiah's church in the New]. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the remnant of men, even all the Gentiles who bear

> my name, may seek the Lord, says the Lord who does these things that have been known for ages.[27]

This passage, James implied, foretold a day when God would bring to himself Gentiles *as Gentiles* without becoming Jews first. He concluded by issuing his judgment that "we should not make it difficult for [*me parenochlein*; literally "stop troubling, annoying," which means in this context, "stop demanding circumcision of"] the Gentiles who are turning to God." F. F. Bruce sensitively observes here that "this decision, despite the conditions that were attached to it, must have compromised the church in the eyes of its Jewish neighbors: it called for no little courage and [here he cites Martin Hengel] 'bears witness to an astounding magnanimity that can hardly be explained on other grounds than the sense of obligation…to follow the intent of Jesus' message.'"[28] James requested only that Gentiles be instructed, not for their salvation's sake but for the sake of the church's peace and harmony between them and their Jewish Christian brothers, that they should abstain from "food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals [which would have been a specific example of "blood"] and from blood" (15:13–21), which could be interpreted as saying in effect no more than that Gentiles should not remain content with the pagan standards of life to which they were accustomed but which more than likely intended that Gentile Christians should indeed avoid eating practices in the presence of Jewish Christians that might offend them.

The Assembly's "Conciliar Decree"

The decision reached by the Jerusalem assembly was no doubt gratifying to Paul. The assembly, under the influence of James's summary judgment, not only upheld the essential soteric principle for which Paul had earlier argued at Antioch against the Judaizers and Cephas but it also endorsed him *personally* and *publicly* (see "our beloved [*agapetois*] Barnabas and Paul" in the assembly's decree). Richard Longenecker notes:

> When one considers the situation of the Jerusalem church in AD 49, the decision reached by the Jerusalem Christians must be considered one of the boldest and most magnanimous in the annals of church history. While still attempting to minister exclusively to the [Jewish] nation, they refused to impede the progress of that other branch of the Christian mission whose every success meant further oppression for them.[29]

The assembly's "decree" (Acts 15:24–29) is a model of "walking the razor's edge" between truth and error and is worth citing in full with some concluding

comments:

> The apostles and elders, your brothers. To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings. Since we heard that certain ones, going out from us, troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, with [words, we say,][30] which we did not authorize, we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends [*tois agapetois hemon*] Barnabas and Paul—men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us[31] that we should not burden [*epitithesthai*] you with anything beyond these following requirements [*pln touton ton epanankes*]: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.[32]

By its decree the Jerusalem assembly, setting certain practical and ethical standards for Gentile participation in the Christian community, manifestly upheld God's demand both for truth and for love for the brotherhood: the Judaizers would have to accept the truth of God's law-free gospel and stop insisting that Gentiles must adopt the Jewish lifestyle in order to be saved [they never did]; Gentile Christians in love would have to avoid offending Jewish Christians who might still hold certain Jewish dietary and ceremonial scruples (see Rom. 14 and 1 Cor. 8 where Paul regards such Jewish Christians as "weaker" brothers). Moreover, the Jerusalem assembly stands as a great exemplar of the effort to reach balanced decisions in the life of the church through Spirit-directed deliberation and to the truth that good things *can* come out of church controversy.[33]

What should we make of the "requirements" which the decree stipulated for Gentile Christians? And required for what? In response to these questions F. F. Bruce observes that

> Peter…must have been well pleased [with these "requirements"]. The decision, which had to do largely with the avoidance of certain kinds of food by Gentile Christians, promised to prevent the recurrence of the awkwardness which had recently arisen at Antioch, and Peter, in the course of his more extended missionary journeys, probably recommended it to other churches.
>
> As for Paul, he took a different line. Where true religion and basic

> Christian ethics were involved, he was as peremptory as anyone could well be in directing his converts to avoid idolatry and fornication [see 1 Cor. 6:12–20; 10:7–8, 14–22]. But in matters (like food) which were religiously and ethically neutral, he refused to lay down the law. No food, he maintained, was "common or unclean" per se—not even if it had been forbidden by the law of Moses, not even if it came from an animal that had been sacrificed to a pagan deity. It was human beings that mattered, not food; if a Christian was considering whether or not to eat this or that kind of food, the decision should depend on the effect which the taking or leaving it would have on the conscience of a fellow Christian [see Rom. 14:14–23]. *When Paul was asked for a ruling on eating the flesh of animals which had been "sacrificed to idols" (cf. 1 Cor. 8:1–11:1), the last thing that would have occurred to him would be to quote a decision of the Jerusalem church as binding on Gentile Christians.* When faced with such questions he argues from the order of creation and the ethical implications of a law-free gospel.[34]

Bruce implies by his remarks that Paul left the assembly with reservations about the food restrictions of the decree and that he probably had determined that he would not require his Gentile converts to observe them because of the decree. I do not agree. It should be noted that Luke reports in Acts 16:4 that "as they traveled from town to town, [Paul and Silas] delivered the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey," Luke then commenting: "So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in number," clearly implying by his latter comment that the decree, including its requirements, had a salutary effect upon the churches. Bruce, however, citing A. S. Geyser for support of his view, declares that Acts 16:4 "is a doublet of the Western reading of 15:41" and concludes, with Geyser, that "there are reasons for doubting if this verse is part of the original text of Acts."[35] The editors of the UBS *Greek New Testament* (fourth revised edition), however, accept the verse without any debate and do not even raise the issue of its authenticity. Furthermore, while it is true that Paul never cites the Jerusalem letter as the authority behind his food instructions to his churches, his instructions were always in line with the assembly's letter. For example, he writes:

> If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience' sake—the

other man's conscience, I mean, not yours…So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God (1 Cor. 10:27–32).

In my opinion R. H. Stein more accurately assesses Paul's attitude toward the assembly's letter:

> Many scholars see these requirements as compromising the Pauline teaching of justification by faith alone and have denied that Paul could ever have accepted such a decree.…As a result some scholars deny the historicity of the Jerusalem decree altogether; some argue that the decree took place at a later time…; and a great many scholars argue that Paul would never have accepted such a decree for it conflicts with his teachings and practice (1 Cor. 8:1–13; 10:25–33). Paul saw all such things as lawful (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23). To have accepted the decree would have compromised his gospel. It would have placed the Gentiles under the Law.
>
> It must be admitted that if the Jerusalem decree taught that salvation for the Gentiles demanded that they keep certain food restrictions, then Paul in principle lost at the Jerusalem council. Salvation is either free and through faith alone or it is not free. It cannot be “mostly” free. Yet it is questionable whether the Jerusalem decree should be interpreted in this manner. [The Jerusalem church leaders] explained the cause for the establishment of [this aspect of their] decree as being due to the fact that “Moses has been preached for generations in every city and has been read each Sabbath in the synagogues” (Acts 15:21). The issue at stake, according to Luke, is not justification but rather social intercourse between Jews and Gentiles. The decree does not add a requirement for Gentiles who are seeking salvation. Rather, they are directions given by the Spirit (Acts 15:28) which seek to promote sensitivity on the part of Gentile Christians with respect to issues that were especially offensive to Jews.
>
> If we observe Paul's own practice concerning the scruples of “weaker” brethren, it is quite clear that he always accommodated his personal liberty and practice in order not to offend the sensitive among his congregations. On several occasions a similar problem arose in his churches. At times it involved eating food dedicated to idols (1 Cor. 8:1–13; 10:23–33); at times it involved those who objected to eating meat (Rom. 14:1–15). In such instances, whereas Paul agreed with those advocating freedom, he always surrendered his own freedom in order not to offend the “weak,” and he urged those who had a similar understanding of the freedom of the gospel to

do the same. For Paul circumcision was an irrelevant issue in itself, for it only involved the presence or absence of a piece of skin[36] unless one argued that the removal of this piece of skin was a requirement for salvation. Thus when a theological issue was at stake, he refused to have Titus circumcised (Gal. 2:1–3); but in the case of Timothy, when it did not involve a theological issue but permitted greater freedom in ministering among the Jews, he was willing to have him circumcised (Acts 16:1–3).

To understand Paul's view of freedom, we must recognize that he was so free that, unless a theological issue was at stake, he could willingly surrender his freedom in order to facilitate the spread of the gospel. This is seen most clearly in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23. Although free, Paul voluntarily became a slave to the weaknesses of others.…[He] would have no problem urging Gentile believers that they should keep the decree when they were in the presence of Jews, for truly free persons are only free when they can surrender their freedom out of love for the weak. For Paul this could even involve taking a Jewish vow, if it helped in his ministry among the Jews (Acts 18:18; 21:26).[37]

Richard Longenecker also observes, I think correctly, that the assembly's decree was

> the type of decision consistent with the character and commitments of James and the Jerusalem apostles as portrayed elsewhere in Acts and Galatians. They could hardly have officially commended the Pauline policies.…But neither could they be found resisting the general teaching of Scripture or the evident acceptance of the Gentiles by God expressed in miraculous and providential fashion. On the other hand, they could not overlook the practical demands involved in a ministry to Israel. Therefore, while they could not clasp the Gentile mission to their bosom or condone certain excesses which were rumored among the Jews to be prevalent in the Gentile world, they did disassociate themselves from the disruptive preaching of the Judaizers. And that was of immense importance to Paul and the furtherance of the Gentile mission.[38]

Martin Franzmann quite correctly concludes:

> The “necessary things” requested of the Gentiles are not marked as necessary to salvation and are therefore not a reimposing of the Law upon them; this is [a prudent] *request* [for the sake of peace and unity] addressed to the Gentiles, a request which asked them to abstain from foods and practices abominable to Jewish feelings, foods and practices which their

pagan past and their pagan surroundings made natural and easy for them. It is understandable that abstention from "unchastity" should be included also in the request when we remember how closely connected unchastity was with pagan worship, pagan festivals, and pagan life generally. The so-called Apostolic Decree is therefore anything but a triumph of Judaic legalism. If a burden of love was laid upon the Gentile brethren by it, the Judaic brethren also assumed no light burden in not expecting and asking more. The reception of the letter at Antioch (Acts 15:31), and later on in the province of Galatia (Acts 16:4, 5), shows that the Gentile churches did not view it as a defeat for Gentile freedom: "They rejoiced at the exhortation *[paraklēsei*—"encouraging message"]" (15:31) and [the churches] "were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily" (Acts 16:5).

The men of the church learned [thereby] not to use their freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love to "be servants of one another" (Gal. 5:13). Thus Christianity was safeguarded against a reimposition of the Law; the very real danger that Christianity might degenerate into a Judaic sect (and so perish with Judaism) was averted. And the unity of the church was preserved; the new Gentile church was kept in contact with the Judaic church, to which it owed the Gospel and was thus kept firmly rooted in the Old Testament Scriptures—a great blessing, for the history of the church has shown how readily alien and corrosive influences beset the Gospel, once contact with the Old Testament is lost. To surrender the Old Testament is the first step toward misunderstanding, perverting, and so losing the Gospel of the New Testament.[39]

The Assembly's Aftermath and Its Implications for Presbyterian "Connectionalism"

Their position having been completely endorsed by the conciliar decree drawn up by the Jerusalem assembly, Paul and Barnabas, accompanied by Judas and Silas, two leaders of the Christian brotherhood in Jerusalem whose assigned task was to "confirm by word of mouth" what the assembly had written in its decree, returned to Antioch, the pure gospel of grace having once again been defended and reaffirmed and the church in its character as a *worldwide* refuge for *all* believing people—Jews and Gentiles alike—having been preserved and the sole requirement for church membership having been defined as a living faith in Jesus Christ!

Judas and Silas, being prophets, spent a period of time in Antioch encouraging and strengthening the Antioch brotherhood, which labor doubtless

included confirming to the brotherhood what the assembly had written. Then Judas returned to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch “some days” (see Acts 15:36) where they with many others also continued to teach and to preach the word of the Lord (Acts 15:32–36).

We may conclude the following four things for our present interest from this great event. First, whereas according to the Congregational form of church government the local church has the right to determine for itself the requirements for church membership, and for that matter everything else, the Acts 15 material makes clear that the local congregations at Antioch, related to one another as the “Antioch presbytery,” did not believe that they had sufficient authority to settle for themselves the terms of church membership in their churches. In order to decide the issue authoritatively they obviously believed that it was necessary for them to request the convening of the assembly of elders in Jerusalem. Therefore, the Antioch presbytery deputed Paul and Barnabas to go to Jerusalem as its representatives to meet with the Jerusalem presbytery. Elders from presbyteries in Syria and Cilicia may also have been in attendance (see Acts 15:23; 16:4).

Second, the appeal made by the Antioch presbytery to the apostles (*acting as elders in the church*[40]) and the Jerusalem presbytery resulted in the Antioch elders/overseers meeting as delegated commissioners with the Jerusalem presbytery in a general assembly. *Deliberating together*, they determined the condition of church membership for the *entire* church and rendered their decision in the form of a “letter” (Acts 15:23–29), which letter is referred to technically by many New Testament scholars as the “Apostolic Decree.”[41]

Third, Luke describes this letter in Acts 16:4 as “the decisions [*ta dogmata*, meaning “rules, regulations, laws, decrees”] reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people *to obey* [phulassein],” and it was sent, not just back to the churches at Antioch that had asked the original question, but to the churches throughout Syria and Cilicia as well, clearly with the presumption on the part of the Jerusalem assembly that its instructions were to be heeded and to be viewed by all the churches as church law. Clearly, the apostles and elders did not regard these congregations as independent and autonomous. Rather, because these churches were all part of the one body of Christ, they were to be mutually submissive to, mutually dependent upon, and mutually accountable to one another. For any church to have rejected the assembly's instructions would have placed that church beyond the pale of Christian orthodoxy.

Fourth, in order to confirm the Jerusalem assembly's “rules” and to provide any requested explanation of their meaning to the original “lower court(s),” the

assembly commissioned Judas and Silas both to convey to the Antioch church their letter and to confirm to them, as "living Minutes of the Proceedings," what the "upper court" had decided. It is striking that the Jerusalem assembly did not assign this task to Paul and Barnabas. No doubt the assembly assigned the task to Judas and Silas because its letter mentioned Barnabas and Paul favorably and, therefore, had Barnabas and Paul conveyed the letter themselves, the confirmation of the assembly's decision would likely not have been viewed as in conformity with the biblical injunction that council proceedings have to follow the principle of establishing truth by the mouth of two or three unbiased witnesses.

In sum, Presbyterians believe that the New Testament teaches in a schematic way ecclesiastical "connectionalism" between local churches, presbyteries, and a general assembly because they see it being lived out by the church in Acts 15!

Christ's Mandate for Visible Ecclesiastical Unity

Presbyterians also labor for a scriptural connectionalism for a second reason. Jesus prayed just prior to his crucifixion that his disciples would exhibit a *visible* unity before the world (John 17:20–21).[42] Taking seriously our Lord's concern for the visible unity of his church, Paul labored mightily in all of his missionary efforts to achieve and to preserve Jesus' prayed-for visible unity of the church, not only between Christian Jew and Christian Gentile in particular but also between Christians in general. In Ephesians 4:3–6 he speaks of seven "ones." There are, he says, one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God the Father over all—these "ones" making Christian *dis*unity a thing almost inconceivable—and he called on Christians to be diligent to work for and to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace. In 1 Corinthians 10:17 he writes: "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." In 1 Corinthians 12:12–13 he teaches that "we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body…and we were all given the one Spirit to drink."

In light of the biblical emphasis, then, on *visible* Christian unity and "oneness" (see John 10:10–13; Rom. 15:5–6; Gal. 3:28; 1 Cor. 1:10–13; 12:12–13; Eph. 2:14–16; 4:3–6; Phil. 2:2; Col. 3:12–14), why, Presbyterians wonder, do Congregationalists put so much emphasis upon—indeed, even glory in as one of their distinctives—local church autonomy, self-consciously making their *independency* from each other and from other denominational churches a major reason for claiming "bragging rights" over Presbyterian connectionalism so far

as their form of church government reflecting the teaching of the New Testament is concerned? *But where in Scripture is there any mandate at all for such independency among local Christian congregations?* Presbyterians believe there is no such mandate. To the contrary, in light of Jesus' prayer that Christians should exhibit a visible oneness, Paul's seven “ones” and his constant emphasis in his letters on visible Christian unity, and the activities they see exhibited in Acts 15, Presbyterians believe that their ecclesiastical connectionalism best reflects not only the visible oneness for which Jesus prayed, not only the visible oneness which the apostle mandated for the church, but also the visible, concrete connectionalism actually exhibited in Acts 15.

The Purpose of the Spirit's Gifts

In yet a third way do Presbyterians see their ecclesiastical connectionalism taught in and thereby mandated by Scripture. Paul makes it clear that Christ's Spirit in the church has given at least one spiritual gift to every member of his church for the mutual edification of the members of the church. He writes:

> Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and *each member belongs to all the others* [*to de kath heis allelon mele*]. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us (Rom. 12:4–5, emphasis added).

> Paul…To the church of God in Corinth.…*together with all those everywhere* [*sun pasin,… en panti topo*] who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours (1 Cor. 1:1–2).

> There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given *for the common good* [*pros to sumpheron*].…The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all the parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ… Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not any eye, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every

> one of them, just as he has wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. *The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the foot, 'I don't need you!'* [*ou dunatai de ho ophthalmos eipein te cheiri, Chreian sou ouk echo. E palin he kephale tois posin, Chreian humon ouk echo*]. On the contrary those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special care. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lack it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that *its parts should have equal concern for each other* [*to auto huper allelon merimnosin ta mele*]. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it (1 Cor. 12:4–7, 12, 14–26, emphasis added).

Almost in its entirety, Paul gives over to his teaching that the Spirit's gifts are not given for private edification but for the edification of others, which usage reflects the "most excellent way" of love that he had elaborated upon in 1 Corinthians 13. One expression of his concern will suffice: "In the church I would rather speak five intelligible words *to instruct others* than ten thousand words in a tongue" (1 Cor. 14:19, emphasis added).

The upshot of Paul's teaching on the Holy Spirit's gifts to the members of Christ's body is that the Spirit does *not* intend his gifts to cultivate and to encourage independency among Christ's people but rather *mutual dependency*! And since Paul specifically includes in his lists of gifts in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12 gifts pertaining to the governance of Christ's church (Rom. 12: "serving," "teaching," "leadership"; 1 Cor. 12: "those able to help others," "those with gifts of administration"), surely this mutual dependency has to pertain, as in every other area of church life, to the matter of church government as well, and therefore, by good and necessary inference, it should be visible in the church's government. Hence, Presbyterians believe that only a *visible* form of connectionalism between local church bodies through graded courts such as their own does justice to the unity of the body of Christ and reflects the appropriate awareness of Christians' mutual need for and dependence upon each other.

Details That Imply the New Testament Writers Accepted an Ecclesiastical Connectionalism

For yet a fourth reason do Presbyterians accept the connectional principle

of mutual accountability, mutual dependency, and mutual submission among Christian congregations, namely, the many details in the New Testament writings that imply that their writers taught an ecclesiastical connectionalism, the following details being the more obvious among them.

The word *ekklesia* occurs twenty-one times in Luke's Acts to refer to the church: at 2:47 (Western reading); 5:11; 7:38 (of the Mosaic assembly in the Old Testament wilderness); 8:1, 3; 9:31; 11:22, 26; 12:1, 5; 13:1; 14:23, 27; 15:3, 4, 22, 41; 16:5; 18:22; and 20:17, 28. In these verses the *singular* noun is dominant and is used to designate (1) the *entire* community of believers in one locale (8:1), (2) the *entire* community of believers in several regions (9:31), (3) very probably the elder/overseer representatives of the several congregations at Jerusalem (11:22; 18:22), (4) the elder/overseer representatives of the several congregations at Antioch (15:3), (5) all the congregations in Jerusalem (12:1, 5; 15:4), (6) all the congregations at Antioch (11:26; 13:1; 14:27), and (7) all the congregations at Ephesus (20:17, 28). The less dominant plural form occurs in 15:41 and 16:5 to denote individual congregations.[43] A striking use of the singular *ekklesia,* for our present purpose occurs in Acts 15:22 where the Christians from Antioch and Jerusalem (possibly from Syria and Cilicia as well) at the Jerusalem council are referred to as “the whole church” (*hole te ekklesia*; see the same expression in Acts 5:11 where it refers to all the Christians of Jerusalem).

In addition to their most common term, *ekklesia,* for the noun “church,” the New Testament writers employ many other *singular* figurative expressions to describe the *entire* church such as the following: one flock (John 10:16), one body (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:23; Col. 1:18), one new man (Eph. 2:15), the temple of God (or of the Holy Spirit) (1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21–22; 2 Thess. 2:4), the Jerusalem that is above (Gal. 4:26), the new Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22), the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13), the light of the world (Matt. 5:14), a letter from Christ (2 Cor. 3:2–3), the olive tree (Rom. 11:13–24), God's field (1 Cor. 3:9), God's building (1 Cor. 3:9), the chosen lady (2 John 1:1), the wife (or bride) of Christ (Eph. 5:22–31; Rev. 21:9), God's house (Eph. 2:19), the people of God (1 Pet. 2:9–10), a chosen people (1 Pet. 2:9), a holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9), a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9), the circumcision (Phil. 3:3–11), the tabernacle of David (Acts 15:16), the remnant (Rom. 9:27; 11:5–7), the Israel of God (Gal. 6:15–16), God's elect (Rom. 8:33), the faithful in Christ Jesus (Eph. 1:1), a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), the kingdom of God (or of heaven) (Matt. 13), the Way (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22), and the brotherhood of believers (1 Pet. 2:17).

In Acts 8:14 the Jerusalem church sent Peter and John to investigate Philip's

work in Samaria, and in Acts 13:1–3; 14:27 the missionaries who were sent out by the Antioch church, when they returned to Antioch, reported on the state of the Gentile churches which they had founded.

In Acts 11:27–30 Luke informs us that the Antioch church sent a money gift by the hands of Barnabas and Paul to the Jerusalem elders/overseers for the needy during a time of famine in Jerusalem. This deed reflects the Antioch church's sense of oneness with the brotherhood in Jerusalem.

During the same visit to Jerusalem (the “famine visit”) Paul laid before the Jerusalem apostles the substance of the law-free gospel that he had been proclaiming among the Gentiles to gain their recognition of its validity, without which recognition a cleavage would have developed between the church at Jerusalem and his Gentile mission. As it turned out, the Jerusalem apostles not only recognized his gospel as the authentic gospel but also determined a division of missionary labor between Paul and themselves (see Gal. 2:1–10). Clearly both Paul and the Jerusalem apostles saw it to be their responsibility to be united around the *one* law-free gospel, which indeed they were (see 1 Cor. 15:11), and to be partners in a *visible* united church.

James, addressing his letter to “the twelve tribes scattered among the nations” (James 1:1), clearly expected his Jewish Christian readers to assume the responsibility to circularize his letter among their churches.

The Pauline letters, though written to specific churches to address specific *ad hoc* situations, were to be circularized, at least some of them, among other churches as well. For example, Paul instructs the Colossian Christians in Colossians 4:16: “After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the church of the Laodiceans and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea.” Perhaps he is referring here to our “letter to the Ephesians,” which may have been intended as a circular letter that began its circuit at Laodicea and concluded its round at Ephesus.

Peter addressed his first letter to all of his Jewish churches in the five Roman provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Pet. 1:1). Clearly he intended his letter to be circularized throughout these provinces and just as clearly these churches bore the responsibility to see that it was circularized, underscoring the connectional relationship of these churches to each other.

In his materials, John expected Gaius (3 John 1), probably the pastor of the church he addressed in 2 John (for which church he had written 1 John), to assist his itinerant evangelists as they journeyed about the region (3 John 6–8). Writing

as he did his one Book of Revelation to the seven churches mentioned in chapters 2–3, John expected these churches to circularize his Revelation among them.

When Paul argues for the headship of the man over the woman in 1 Corinthians 11:2–16, he concludes his argument by saying: “If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God” (1 Cor. 11:16; see also 1 Cor. 14:33, where Paul affirms the same thing: “As in all the congregations [*ekklesiais*] of the saints, woman should remain silent in the churches [*ekklesiais*]”), underscoring by this comment the many churches' united agreement on this matter.

The New Testament writers name heretics and troublemakers by name for the benefit of all the churches that might read their letters, such as Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim. 1:20; 4:14), Phygelus and Hermogenes (2 Tim. 1:15), Hymenaeus and Philetus (2 Tim. 2:17), Demas (2 Tim. 4:10), Diotrophes (3 John 9), and the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:6, 15).

Throughout his missionary labors Paul concerned himself with the collection of funds from his Gentile churches for the needy in the Jerusalem church. To the church at Corinth, Paul writes: “Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do” (1 Cor. 16:1). And to the church at Rome he writes in this regard:

> Now…I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed *they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings* (Rom. 15:25–27, emphasis added).

F. F. Bruce correctly observes about this fund: “The solidarity of Jewish and Gentile Christianity, in particular the strengthening of fellowship between the church of Jerusalem and the Gentile mission, was a major concern of Paul's, and his organization of the relief fund was in large measure designed to promote this end.”[44]

To the Roman church Paul states that he expected it to help him as he moved westward into Spain: “I plan to [see you] when I go into Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while” (Rom. 15:24). Once again we see Paul assuming the connectional character of the churches.

From such data one must conclude that congregational independency was a foreign concept to the writers of the New Testament. Plainly, they viewed the church, represented at the local level by congregations which they quite willingly refer to as “churches,” primarily as “one body” with one head and king who had given instructions through them to the elders/overseers of the local congregations concerning how they were to conduct themselves in “God's household” and how they were to relate themselves governmentally to other Christians in regions other than their own.

Presbyterianism in Church History

Presbyterians believe that Christ is the king and head of his church and that he, as the king of his church, has determined to rule his church through a system of spiritual and connectional assemblies or “courts” comprised of pluralities of elders/overseers with assistance from deacons at the local church level. That is to say, Christ's exercise of his present kingly reign since Pentecost, in addition to his governance of all things generally, entails *by virtue of the instructions he gave to his church through his apostles' words and practice* more particularly his perpetual governance of his church by councils of elders/overseers and deacons. And to suggest that his Word to his church is not sufficiently clear in the matter of church government is to imply that his kingship is lacking with respect to the governance of the single most significant entity in the world today.

But though Presbyterianism was the biblical government of the church in the first century, the scriptural identity of the elder and the overseer began to suffer slippage in the second century toward what we now refer to as hierarchical Episcopacy. Such was that slippage that by the end of the second century “the original application of the term ‘bishop’ seems to have passed not only out of use, but almost out of memory.”[45] By the end of the third century, under the influence of Cyprian (195–258), bishop of Carthage, the hierarchical view of the episcopate had become simply an unchallenged phenomenon in the church. For Cyprian, the bishop was “the absolute vicegerent of Christ in things spiritual… [and this absolute supremacy of the bishop became] through his exertions a substantial and patent and worldwide fact.”[46]

This slippage away from the New Testament form of church government came about as one expression of the declension away from apostolic teaching that began to appear in other areas as well, such as in soteriology, almost immediately after the age of the apostles.[47] As a result of this confusion, early

church leaders began to feel the need to determine attributes by which the true church could be identified. But because their effort tended to concentrate on the outward characteristics of the church, the church rather quickly began to be viewed as an external institution ruled by a bishop who was a direct successor to the apostles and who accordingly would be (it was presumed) in possession of true apostolic tradition. Accordingly, more and more did the early church fathers place a strong emphasis on the bishopric as an institution, with Cyprian urging that the bishops were the real successors of the apostles and that together they "formed a college, called the episcopate, which as such constituted the unity of the Church."[48] For Cyprian the criterion of church membership became submission to the bishop, and outside of such submission there was no salvation.[49]

Later church fathers, such as Jerome (Hieronymous) (c. 348–c. 420), examined the biblical record and recognized that this development did not have the endorsement of Holy Scripture. "Among the ancients," Jerome writes, "bishops and presbyters are the same" (*Epistles*, lxix). "The Apostle [Paul] plainly shows that presbyters are the same as bishops.…It is proved more clearly that bishops and presbyters are the same" (*Epistles*, cxlvi). Most striking are the following comments of Jerome on Titus 1:5:

> If anyone thinks the opinion that the bishop and presbyters are the same to be not the view of the Scriptures but my own, let him study the words of the Apostle.…With the ancients presbyters were the same as bishops; but *gradually all the responsibility was deferred to a single person*, that the thickets of heresies might be rooted out. Therefore, as presbyters know that *by the custom of the Church* they are subject to him who shall have been set over them, so let bishops also be aware that they are superior to presbyters *more owing to custom than to any actual ordinances of the Lord* (*Ad Tit.* 1.5, emphasis added).

Writing to Jerome, Augustine (354–430) also acknowledges that the distinction that was being drawn in their time between the elder and the overseer had come about, not because of apostolic teaching but as the result of "the practice of the church" (*Epistles* 87.33).

Nevertheless, this prelatic or hierarchical opinion prevailed with virtually no resistance throughout the Middle Ages, resulting finally in the Western Church in all the evils and megalomaniac excesses of the Roman papacy, until John Calvin, the sixteenth-century Genevan reformer, as one aspect of his effort to return the church to its scriptural moorings,[50] finally reinstituted in the four

churches in Geneva, on the basis of his understanding of the ministry of the Word as fourfold, namely, the pastor, the doctor or teacher, the elder, and the deacon, the Presbyterian form of church government, with the churches there having authority over the ministry of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, and the discipline of its members independent of the civil magistrate.[51]

While Calvin's was not the full-blown Presbyterianism we see today, lacking as it did at least one upper court, Calvin's efforts laid the foundation for it, and accordingly Presbyterianism (which, of course, included not only its biblical form of church government but also God's gospel of free grace in Christ) spread from Geneva and developed in Switzerland, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales; and then from these European countries, especially from the British Isles, Presbyterianism spread to the New World where it became very influential in the original American colonies through the Great Awakening (through the efforts of such men as Gilbert Tennant in the North and Samuel Davies in the South) and the American Revolution (through the preaching of such men as John Witherspoon, the only ordained minister to sign the Declaration of Independence, George Duffield, and James Caldwell).[52]

Through the great missionary movement in the nineteenth century, Presbyterian missionaries carried Presbyterianism far and wide, and national Presbyterian churches were founded in many parts of the world. And that same Presbyterian missionary labor continues to be carried out to the present day in and by orthodox Presbyterian church bodies.

Our Presbyterian forebears in seventeenth-century England, following Calvin's lead and taking the sufficiency of Holy Scripture seriously with respect to church government, appealed to Holy Scripture alone for the substance of their *Books of Church Order.* To illustrate, the Westminster Assembly (1643–1649) prefaced[53] its *Book of Church Order*[54] with the following statement crafted from many passages of Scripture:

> Jesus Christ, upon whose shoulders the government is, whose name is called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace; of the increase of whose government and peace there shall be no end; who sits upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgement and justice, from henceforth, even for ever; having all power given unto him in heaven and in earth by the Father, who raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand,

> far above all principalities and powers, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come, and put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things in the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all: he being ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things, received gifts for his church, and gave officers necessary for the edification of his church, and perfecting of his saints.

Their arguments in this statement—*all biblical*—are many: Jesus Christ—upon whose shoulders is the government, who sits upon the throne of David to order and establish his kingdom with judgment and justice forever, into whose hands the Father has delivered all authority in heaven and on earth, whom the Father raised from the dead and seated at his own right hand far above all other authorities, under whose feet the Father has put all things, and whom the Father has made head over all things for the church which is his body—this one, they declare, having received gifts for his church, "gave officers necessary for the edification of his church, and perfecting of his saints." This preface highlights the truth that governance of his church is an aspect of Christ's kingly office.[55]

The *Book of Church Order* (*BCO*) of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) in which I serve as an ordained minister—typical of Presbyterian *BCO*s—elaborates upon this foundational statement: "It belongs to His Majesty from His throne of glory to rule and teach the Church through His Word and Spirit by the ministry of men…" (Preface, I, third paragraph). "Christ, as King, has given to His Church officers, oracles and ordinances; and especially has He ordained therein His system of doctrine, government, discipline and worship, all of which are either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced therefrom; and to which things He commands that nothing be added, and that from them naught be taken away" (Preface, I, fourth paragraph). Then in Part I, Form of Government, chapter 1. "The Doctrine of Church Government," the *BCO* declares:

> 1–1. The Scriptural form of Church government, which is representative or presbyterian, is comprehended under five heads: 1. The Church; 2. Its members; 3. Its officers; 4. Its courts; 5. Its orders.
>
> 1–2. The Church which the Lord Jesus Christ has erected in this world for the gathering and perfecting of the saints is His visible kingdom of grace, and is one and the same in all ages.
>
> 1–3. The members of this visible Church catholic are all those persons in every nation, together with their children, who make profession of their

faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and promise submission to His laws.

1–4. The officers of the Church, by whom all its powers are administered, are, according to the Scriptures, Teaching and Ruling Elders and Deacons. The distinction the *BCO* draws here between teaching and ruling elders it expands upon later:

7–2. Within the class of Elder are the two orders of Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders. The Elders jointly have the government and spiritual oversight of the Church, including teaching. Only those elders who are specially gifted, called and trained by God to preach may serve as Teaching Elders.

These designations are simply current conventions to mark respectively the distinction between the church's ministers of the Word and the church's other elders, all of whom, laboring together, govern the church, a distinction that Presbyterians believe the Holy Scripture itself endorses in the following places: (1) by his reference to "teaching" (*ho didaskon*) and "leadership" (*ho proistamenos*) in Romans 12:7–8 Paul very likely intended to refer to "teaching elders" and "ruling elders" respectively; (2) by his "teachers" (*didaskalous*) and "administration" (*kyberneseis*) in 1 Corinthians 12:28 Paul again very likely intended to refer to "teaching elders" and "ruling elders" respectively; (3) in Ephesians 4:11 the grammatical construction underlying the NIV's "pastors and teachers" (*tous poimenas kai didaskalous*), placing as it does both nouns under the regimen of the one article, suggests that Paul intended not two but one office, thereby identifying the "pastors/teachers" as the teaching elders of the church in distinction from the ruling elders; and (4) in 1 Timothy 5:17 Paul writes: "The elders who direct [*proestōtes*] the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor [*diples times*, namely, both "honor" and "honorarium" (for this latter "honorarium," see 5:18)], that is [*malista*], those toiling in preaching and teaching" (author's translation). As Knight observes, Paul is speaking here of "a subgroup of the 'overseers' that consists of those who are *especially* gifted by God to teach, as opposed to other overseers, who must all 'be *able* to teach.'"[56]

"Ruling elders" then is a term descriptive of the nonministerial elders of the church; "teaching elders" are those that have been set apart for the ministry of the Word. Of these two kinds of elders the *BCO* states, first, about the teaching elder:

8–4. As the Lord has given different gifts to men and has committed to some special gifts and callings, the Church is authorized to call and appoint some to labor as Teaching Elders, in such works as may be needful to the

Church. When a Teaching Elder is called to such a needful work, it shall be incumbent upon him to make full proof of his ministry by disseminating the Gospel for the edification of the Church.

8–5. When a man is called to labor as a Teaching Elder, it belongs to his order, in addition to those functions he shares with all other Elders, to feed the flock by reading, expounding and preaching the Word of God and to administer the Sacraments. As he is sent to declare the will of God to sinners, and to beseech them to be reconciled to God through Christ, he is termed [in Scripture] Ambassador. As he bears glad tidings of salvation to the ignorant and perishing he is termed Evangelist. As he stands to proclaim the Gospel, he is termed Preacher. As he dispenses the manifold grace of God, and the ordinances instituted by Christ, he is termed Steward of the mysteries of God. Then of the Ruling Elders the *BCO* declares:

8–8. As there were in the Church under the law, Elders of the people for the government thereof, so in the Gospel church, Christ has furnished others beside Ministers of the Word with gifts and commission to govern when called thereunto, which are called Ruling Elders.

8–9. Elders being of one class of office, Ruling Elders possess the same authority and eligibility to office in the courts of the Church as Teaching Elders. They should, moreover, cultivate zealously their own aptness to teach the Bible and should improve every opportunity of doing so.

And of the deacons the *BCO* states:

7–2. The office of Deacon is not one of rule, but rather of service both to the physical and spiritual needs of the people.

Preparing its reader for its later and fuller expression of the “connectional” principle within Presbyterianism, the *BCO* then states:

1–5. Ecclesiastical jurisdiction is not a several, but a joint power, to be exercised by presbyters in courts. These courts may have jurisdiction over one or many churches, but they sustain such mutual relations as to realize the idea of the unity of the Church.

1–6. The ordination of officers is ordinarily by a court [ruling elders are ordained by the local church elders; ministers of the Word, though *called* by the local congregation to labor among them, are *ordained* and installed in their work by presbyteries], except in the case of ordination by a Presbytery's evangelist [who “in foreign countries or the destitute parts of

> the Church…until there is a Session in the Church [to do so, may] instruct, examine, ordain, and install Ruling Elders and Deacons [and] receive and dismiss members" [*BCO*, 8–6].
>
> 1–7. This Scriptural doctrine of Presbytery is necessary to the perfection of the order of the visible Church, but is not essential to its existence.

Coming then directly to its treatment of the "connectional" principle itself, in its *BCO*, chapter 10, "Church Courts in General," the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), in concert with Presbyterianism in general, declares:

> 10–1. The Church is governed by various courts, in regular graduation, which are all, nevertheless, Presbyteries, as being composed exclusively of presbyters.
>
> 10–2. These courts are church Sessions, Presbyteries, and the General Assembly.

Here we are informed that Presbyterian connectionalism has worked itself out in church history, in accordance with the New Testament schema, in terms of three (in some cases, four[57]) levels of graded church "courts": (1) the local council of elders/overseers referred to as the session or consistory that exercises authority over the local congregation, (2) some of these same elders/overseers, together with elders/overseers from other local churches, serve periodically as members also of a presbytery or classis that usually meets quarterly to exercise authority over the several local churches in its geographically circumscribed area, and more specifically to examine and to ordain ministers of the gospel and to exercise discipline over the same when the need arises,[58] and (3) some of these elders/overseers, together with elders/overseers from other presbyteries, serve also as members of a national General Assembly or synod that usually meets annually to exercise authority over the several presbyteries in a region or country, to worship God together, to hear reports on the spiritual health and future plans of the church's mission agencies and educational institutions, and to adjudicate disciplinary cases that come before it from the lower courts. This connectional system of graded courts reflects the unity of the church catholic, regional, and local.

Admittedly, within this same Presbyterian history, however, there have been some differences of opinion expressed by Presbyterian scholars as to whether church authority resides primarily in the local church session or in the highest court of the church, some Scottish Presbyterians urging a kind of "aristocratic

Presbyterianism" in which authority is vested in the highest court (the general assembly) and then delegated downward to the lower courts. William Cunningham explains:

> The Presbyterians of this country [Scotland] about the time of the Westminster Assembly, had perhaps somewhat higher and more aristocratic ideas of the power and authority of ecclesiastical office-bearers and church courts than had been generally entertained by the Reformers of the preceding century; not that there was any very marked or definite difference of opinion…between them on this subject, but [for these later Presbyterians this "somewhat aristocratic" disposition arose in order] to keep rather at a distance from anything that might seem to favor Congregationalism. Accordingly, there is nothing direct or explicit upon the subject of the place and standing of the people in the general regulation of ecclesiastical affairs…nothing, indeed, but the general statement…that Christ has given the ministry to the church.[59]

Louis Berkhof, following in the company of William Cunningham and James Bannerman, gives expression to the essence of the more "democratic" expression of Presbyterian church government, in which authority is vested in the local church session and then delegated upward, in the following five principles:

> 1. Christ is the Head of his church and the Source of all its authority;
>
> 2. Christ exercises his authority in his church ultimately by means of the Word of God and his Spirit;
>
> 3. Christ has endowed both the ordinary members and the officers of his church with authority, with the officers receiving such additional authority as is required for the performance of their respective duties;
>
> 4. Christ has provided for the specific exercise of authority by representative organs (elders/overseers) who are set apart for the maintenance of doctrine, worship, and discipline; and
>
> 5. The authority of the church resides primarily in the session of the local church, with presbyteries and general assemblies possessing only such authority as are granted them by the several local churches.[60]

The first four principles are sound and I heartily approve of them, but with Berkhof's fifth principle I take exception. I would urge that each "court" in Presbyterianism, if the connectional court system is scriptural at all (which Berkhof believes it is), would necessarily have its own intrinsic authority

peculiar to itself; for if Christ has in fact authorized ascending levels of courts, the upper levels possess necessarily and intrinsically just the authority he has granted them in their authorization to exist. To illustrate my point, the "General Assembly" meeting in Acts 15 and dealing with the problem of the requirements for church membership that had risen specifically in the churches at Antioch, as we saw earlier, did not ask the other local churches in Syria and Cilicia if it might issue to them its conclusions, reached by deliberation, in the form of its dogmatic letter. The Jerusalem assembly believed it had the authority to do so, and accordingly it did so. Samuel Rutherford, though he seems to have favored only slightly the "somewhat aristocratic" construction of Presbyterianism, gives expression to this "middle" perspective which denies both a descending and an ascending derivation of authority between the courts when he wrote:

> To a congregation [Christ] has given, by an immediate influx from Himself, a political power intrinsically in it, derived from none but immediately from Jesus Christ, and the object of this power is those things that concern a Congregation; and that same Head and Lord has given immediately an intrinsic power to the Presbytery, in things that are purely classical, and that without either the intervening derivation of either a Congregation that is inferior to the Presbytery, by ascending, or without any derivative flux of a Synodical, national or Catholic visible Church, by descending.[61]

Whatever one may finally decide with regard to these variant expressions of Presbyterianism that have been advanced in Presbyterian history (it should be obvious that I myself endorse the "middle" position), and while the history of Presbyterianism, simply as history, is, in my opinion, thrilling to contemplate, this much seems indisputable: On the basis of the New Testament evidence the Presbyterian form of church government—one that was both *conciliar* (with local counsels comprised of elders/overseers governing local churches) and *connectional* (with elders/overseers from local churches comprising city or regional presbyteries)—was the earliest form of church government. *If then one is looking for a church that is biblical and apostolic in church government, he will find it in orthodox Presbyterian churches.*[62]

Qualifications, Duties, and Ordination of Church Officers

I turn now to a discussion of the qualifications, duties, and ordination of the officers of the church. Evidencing that Christ as the head of his body, the church, exercises his kingship over the church through appointed men as church officers,

the New Testament writers make clear that Christ has appointed two and only two offices in his church—the elder/overseer and the deacon. According to Paul, each office requires that the men who hold them meet the following specific spiritual qualifications and perform the following specific duties:

Qualifications of the Elder/Overseer

To facilitate faithful shepherd care over the flock of God, Paul lists the qualifications of the elder/overseer in 1 Timothy 3:2–7 and Titus 1:6–9.[63] The elder/overseer, he insists: (1) must live a life which is above reproach (*anepilempton*), that is, he must be blameless (*anenklētos*), and have a good reputation with nonbelievers (*marturian kalen…apo ton exothen*) (1 Tim. 3:2, 7; Titus 1:6); (2) must be the husband of one wife (*mias gunaikos andra*) (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6);[64] (3) must be temperate (*nephalion*), self-controlled (*sophrona*), respectable (*kosmion*), hospitable (*philoxenon*), gentle (*epieike*), upright (*dikaion*), holy (*hosion*), disciplined (*enkrate*), and love the morally good (*philagathon*) (1 Tim. 3:2–3; Titus 1:8); (4) must not be given to drunkenness (*me paroinon*) or to violence (*me plekten*), must not be self-willed (*me authade*), quick-tempered (*me orgilon*), a pursuer of dishonest gain (*me aischrokerde)*, or a lover of money (*aphilarguron*) (1 Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7); (5) must manage his own family well, and see that his children, who are to be believers (*echon pista*), obey him with proper respect and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient (*me en kategoria asotias e anupotakta*) (1 Tim. 3:4; Titus 1:6); (6) must be able to take care of (*epimelesetai*) God's church and oversee God's work (1 Tim. 3:5; Titus 1:7); (7) must not be a recent convert (*neophuton*) (1 Tim. 3:6); (8) must hold firmly to (*antechomenon*) the trustworthy message as it has been taught (*kata ten didachen*) (Titus 1:9); and (9) must be able to teach (*didaktikon*) and thereby be able both to encourage (*parakalein*) others by sound doctrine and to refute (*elenchein*) those who oppose this teaching (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:9).

Duties of the Elder/Overseer

Just as their Savior, the Good Shepherd, looked with compassion on the multitudes and saw them as sheep having no shepherd (John 10:11, 14; Matt. 9:36), so also the elders/overseers of Christ's church, according to Paul, are to “take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God” (Acts 20:28 NKJV). Peter likewise instructed elders/overseers: “Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest

gain but eagerly, nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:2–3). These instructions clearly imply that elders/overseers, as shepherds of God's flock, are responsible for the following. First, they must keep the members of their flock from going astray. This implies the need for instruction and warning. An elder must be able and ready to teach and to catechize those under his care, which means, of course, that he must faithfully labor to acquire a knowledge of God's Word in order to teach it.

Second, they must go after the members of their flock when they go astray. This implies reproof, correction, and in some cases the exercise of church discipline. Of course, elders/overseers should attempt by private instruction and admonition to correct an erring member of their flock at the earliest state of spiritual or moral defection before open and censurable sin breaks forth that would require a harsher measure of discipline.

Third, elders/overseers must protect the members of their flock from the "wolves"—the teachers of false doctrine and evil practices—that would enter in among them. This implies meticulous, careful application of the admission requirements for church membership and a constant effort to cultivate in the faithful a discerning apprehension of the distinction between truth and error.

Finally, elders/overseers should lead the members of their flock to the fold and pour oil into their wounds and give them pure water to quench their thirst. This implies vigilant pastoral concern for and oversight of their flock's spiritual needs. Elders/overseers should be keenly aware of the fact that many of their people will be broken in spirit and spiritually wounded for many and varied reasons. This means that elders/overseers should be ready, whenever the need arises, to visit and to pray for the sick (James 5:14) and, as Jesus did (Matt. 12:18–20), to bind up the broken reed, to lift up the fallen hand, to strengthen the weakened knee, and to fan the smoking flax back into a bright and healthy flame.[65]

Reflecting its awareness of these duties, the *BCO*, 8–3, describes the elder's duties in this language:

> It belongs to the office of Elder, both severally and jointly, to watch diligently over the flock committed to their charge, that no corruption of doctrine or of morals enter therein. They must exercise government and discipline, and take oversight not only of the spiritual interests of the particular church, but also the Church generally when called thereunto. They should visit the people at their homes, especially the sick. They should instruct the ignorant, comfort the mourner, nourish and guard the

children of the Church. All those duties which private Christians are bound to discharge by the law of love are especially incumbent upon them by divine vocation, and are to be discharged as official duties. They should pray with and for the people, being careful and diligent in seeking the fruit of the preached Word among the flock.

By doing these things in and by the Spirit's animation elders/ overseers will carry out their duties as overseers of God's flock.

Qualifications of the Deacon

Paul's qualifications for the deacon are found in 1 Timothy 3:8–12. The deacon, he commands: (1) must be worthy of respect (*semnous*) and sincere, literally, not “two-faced” (*me dilogous*) (3:8); (2) must not indulge in much wine (3:8); (3) must not pursue dishonest gain (3:8); (4) must be the husband of one wife (*mias gunaikos andres*) (3:12), whose wife,[66] engaged with her husband in his diaconal ministry, in turn must also be worthy of respect (*semnas*), not a malicious talker (*me diabolous*) but temperate (*nephalious*) and trustworthy in everything (*pistas en pasin*) (3:11); (5) must manage his children and his household well (3:12); (6) must maintain a hold on (*echontas*) the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience (3:9); and (7) must first be tested (dokimazesthosan) before being given the diaconal task (3:10).

Duties of the Deacon

Just as their Lord became a “servant” (*diakonon*) (Rom. 15:8; see also Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45; John 13:1–17), so also deacons, likely first chosen to assist the apostles (Acts 6:1–7), were thereafter appointed to serve the people under the supervision of the elders/ overseers.[67] To enable the elders/overseers not to have to neglect (Acts 6:2) but rather to devote themselves to prayer for the congregation and to oversight of the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4), deacons, under the supervision and authority of the elders/overseers, are to discharge their duties pertaining especially but not exclusively to the material needs of the congregation, such as service both to the needy among the saints and, as divine providence permits, to the world, and the care and maintenance of the church's physical properties. The *BCO*, 9.1–2, describes the duties of deacons as follows:

> 9–1. The office of Deacon is set forth in the Scriptures as ordinary and perpetual in the Church. The office is one of sympathy and service, after the example of the Lord Jesus; it expresses also the communion of the saints, especially in their helping one another in time of need.

9–2. It is the duty of the Deacons to minister to those who are in need, to the sick, to the friendless, and to any who may be in distress. It is their duty also to develop the grace of liberality in the members of the church, to devise effective methods of collecting the gifts of the people, and to distribute these gifts among the objects to which they are contributed. They shall have the care of the property of the congregation, both real and personal, and shall keep in proper repair the church edifice and other buildings belonging to the congregation.

Ordination of Church Officers

So replete is Christ's instruction through his apostles with respect to the governance of his church that his instructions even include principal procedures to follow in ordaining and disciplining these officers. In accordance with the practice initiated in the Old Testament (1) as a rite of patriarchal blessing (Gen. 48:14), (2) as a rite of public designation and of setting a person apart for service as in the two cases of the ordination of the Levites by the Israelites (Num. 8:10) and Moses' ordination of Joshua (Num. 27:18–23; see Deut. 34:9), (3) as a rite of dedication and offering someone or something up to God (Lev. 1:4; 3:2; 4:24; 16:21; 24:14), and (4) as evidenced in Timothy's ordination by a body of elders/overseers laying hands upon him (*epitheseos ton cheiron tou presbyteriou*),[68] Presbyterians lawfully infer that ordinarily a plurality of elders/overseers must ordain men to the office of elder/ overseer in the church by the laying on of hands (1 Tim. 4:14).[69]

In order that an elder not be a “new convert” (1 Tim. 3:8) and in order that deacons may “first be tested” (1 Tim. 3:10), Paul instructs Timothy: “Do not be hasty in laying on of hands [that is, in the ordination of men to church office] (1 Tim. 5:22).” In order that justice may prevail in the church when a complaint is registered against an elder, Paul instructs Timothy: “Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses (1 Tim. 5:19).” In order that doctrinal and moral purity may prevail in the church when elders/overseers lapse into sin, Paul instructs Timothy: “Those [elders/overseers] who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning” (1 Tim. 5:20; see Gal. 2:17).

Just as the apostles as church elders “laid their hands” upon the first seven deacons, ordaining them thereby to their office, so Presbyterians lawfully infer that a plurality of elders/overseers must ordain deacons to the office of deacon by the laying on of hands (Acts 6:6). Finally, “everything should be done in a

fitting and orderly way" (1 Cor. 14:40). To fulfill this very general obligation the courts of Presbyterian churches today conduct their business in accordance with the parliamentary procedure set forth in the latest edition of *Robert's Rules of Order.* The employment of this authority in parliamentary procedure is not a usurpation by a human authority of the governance of God's household but merely reflects the effort on the part of the elders/overseers to govern the church in a manner "common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed" (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, I.VI).

To summarize, during the New Testament age a twofold pattern of labor for the official ministry of the church was present: that of oversight (*episikopoi*) and that of service (*diakonoi*). That is to say, Christian churches were governed by spiritually qualified councils of elders/overseers and served by spiritually qualified deacons, all of whom (except the initial elders/overseers who may have been ordained by the apostles) were to be chosen by the people. The pertinent passages here (Acts 6:1–4; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1–13) "show … a twofold division of labor in early, middle, and later time periods in the NT church, in key cities in three different geographical areas (Palestine, Greece, and Asia Minor), and in both Jewish and Greco-Roman settings."[70] The church has no authority to overturn this clearly delineated apostolic pattern.

The Nature of Presbyterian Oversight Rule

The nature of Presbyterian oversight rule is exclusively spiritual and moral over against the civil and legislative authority of the state—also a divinely appointed authority (Rom. 13:1–7)—the latter authority often manifesting itself in physically coercive ways against human violence and public disorder. That is to say, the elders/overseers' authority is strictly ministerial and declarative, not imperial, magisterial, or legislative. They have no authority to devise and/or to legislate new novelties of faith or worship that have no scriptural warrant.

These overseers are to address the spiritual and moral needs of their flock who were, prior to their salvation, by nature slaves to sin and Satan, and who are, after their salvation, in need of instruction in the details of living out their most holy faith before a watching world. This is not to say that the courts of the church must not speak out against political injustice and moral abuses by the state, such as state-condoned abortions, state-approved homosexual marriages,

and doctor-assisted euthanasia, for they must. Indeed, they must be willing to speak out against the moral abuses of society wherever they occur.[71] But the elders/overseers must never resort to physical force in order to establish a beachhead for the church's ministry within the human community it seeks to reach for Christ and to nurture in him.[72]

This spiritual and ministerial nature of the church's authority is taught in the following passages:

> Jesus called [his disciples] together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles *lord it* [katakurieuousin] over them, and their high officials *exercise authority* [*katexousiazousin*] over them. *Not so with you.* Instead, *whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave*—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:25–28, emphasis added) (See parallel in Luke 22:24–26).
>
> One of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. "*Put your sword back in its place*," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (Matt. 26:51–52, emphasis added).
>
> When the disciples James and John saw [a Samaritan village opposing Jesus], *they asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?" But Jesus turned and rebuked them*, and they went to another village (Luke 9:54–56, emphasis added).
>
> Jesus said [to Pilate], *"My kingdom is not of this world.* If it were, my servants would fight to prevent *my arrest by the Jews.* But now *my kingdom is from another place."* "You are a king, then!" said Pilate. Jesus answered, "You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and *for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.* Everyone on the side of truth listens to me" (John 18:36–37, emphasis added).
>
> Though we live in the world, *we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.* On the contrary, they have divine power [*dunata to theo*] to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and *we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ* (2 Cor. 10:3–4, emphasis added).
>
> Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For *our*

struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with *the belt of truth* buckled around your waist, with *the breastplate of righteousness* in place, and with your *feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.* In addition to all this, take up *the shield of faith*, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take *the helmet of salvation* and *the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.* And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests (Eph. 6:11–18a, emphasis added).

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; *not lording it over* [*med hos katakurieuontes*] *those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock* (1 Pet. 5:1–2, emphasis added).

The Church's Responsibility to Submit to the Ministerial Authority of Its Elders/Overseers

We made the point earlier that the local congregation must recognize that the church is *not* a pure democracy, that elders/overseers, once elected, do not hold their office simply to carry out the congregation's will. They are to rule and to oversee the congregation, not primarily in agreement with the will of the congregation but primarily in agreement with the revealed Word of God, in accordance with the authority delegated to them by Christ, the head of the church.

Two passages in particular speak directly to the congregation's responsibility to submit to its lawfully elected elders/overseers (who are in turn accountable to one another), illustrating once again the fullness of the Scripture's instruction regarding church government:

Now we ask you, brothers, to respect [*eidenai*] those who work hard among you; who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard [*hegeistha…huperekperissou*] in love because of

their work (1 Thess. 5:12–13).

> Remember your leaders, who spoke the work of God to you, considering the outcome of their lives [anatheorountes *ten ekbasin tes anastrophes*], and imitate [*mimeisthe*] their faith.…Obey [*Peithesthe*] your leaders and submit [*hupeikete*] to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.…Greet [*Aspasathe*] all your leaders [for me] (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24).

Here, in short compass, the body of Christ is instructed by its head through his apostles to respect, hold in high regard, remember, consider the outcome of the lives of, imitate, obey, and submit to their leaders, who in turn work hard among them, who are over them, who admonish them, who speak the Word of God to them, and who keep watch over them. Apparently, the members of the congregation should also stay on speaking terms with their leaders since they are instructed by the author of Hebrews to greet them in the author's behalf.

The Practical Importance of Presbyterian Government

Why is this matter of church government in general important? Because Christ, the head of the church, has not been silent regarding how his church is to be governed. He has spoken in Holy Scripture about it, and his church should heed his instructions. And why is Presbyterian church government in particular important? Because Presbyterianism is not only the most biblically sound form of church government, but also it provides the most trustworthy, just, and peaceful way for the church to determine its principles, its practices, and its priorities and to resolve its differences. Loss of balance in church government in one direction leads to hierarchical tyranny. Loss of balance in the other direction leads to congregational anarchy, followed by the tyranny of the one or the few. Of course, the Spirit of God must always animate Presbyterianism, but the form itself is God-given and therefore important.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Christian church in our day is about to self-destruct because of its abandonment of biblical church government, which in turn has fostered abandonment in many quarters of the gospel itself. How so? Because on the one hand, in the case of hierarchical Episcopacy, local congregations abound in number that have no recourse when authoritarian churchmen in high places force their decisions upon them. The apostolic form of church government will deliver these churches from such hierarchical tyranny,

for it is nothing short of tyranny when ecclesiastical bureaucrats lord it over local congregations and force unwanted ministers on them or refuse them the ministers they request. (Such practices are being regularly done today.) The republicanism of biblical and early church government is the answer to this hierarchical oppression.

On the other hand, in the case of Congregationalism, there are too many ministers and too many churches that are accountable to no one today. This is one reason we have our Jonestowns and Wacos. This is one reason we have our Jim Bakkers, Jimmy Swaggarts, and Jesse Jacksons. Large areas of Christianity are in a state of anarchy because churches and pastors are a law unto themselves, answering to no one. Our hero-worshipping churches, influenced as they have been by our hero-worshipping culture, have elevated talented men to such celebrity status that mortal flesh cannot bear the heights. One should not be surprised then when sexual indiscretions, a divorce rate among church ministers as high as the American national average, and financial mismanagement by the clergy follow. Power still corrupts. The pastor (or church) who answers to no one inevitably experiences the warping of priorities under the influence of his (or its) privately held biases. Understandably, scandalous deeds ensue.

The collective impact of these almost daily church scandals is all but ruining the Christian witness in our generation. Does the American populace really respect the American church? A small percentage does, no doubt, but, while what Ralph Nader says matters, what E. F. Hutton says matters, what the church thinks about things does not really matter to most people. And ministers —how do they fare in the public's opinion?

> In a recent study measuring social prestige, on a scale of one to one hundred, ministers ranked fifty-second, cheek by jowl with factory foremen and the operators of power stations, far below the medical doctors and lawyers with whom they would like to be confused. In another national poll, *only 16 percent of the public expressed confidence in their leadership.*[73]

Is it not vitally necessary, then, that the principle of representative rule by a plurality of elders/overseers who are in turn accountable to other elders/overseers rather than rule by autocratic “loose cannons” be restored in the life of our churches?

What I am arguing here is that Presbyterian church government is not an irrelevancy. Besides the fact that Presbyterianism is biblical (which is paramount, of course), church ministry and church government, I maintain,

cannot be separated. One road to church renewal and church growth, therefore, is the restoration of the biblical form of church government in the church, for representative and connectional church government provides the essential "checks and balances" necessary to keep the church on track with regard to biblically mandated ministry responsibilities and concerns and to protect it from anarchy on the one side and tyranny on the other.

Conclusion

As I conclude my discussion I can do no better by way of summary than to cite once again George W. Knight III:

> An analysis of the [biblical] data seems…to indicate the existence of oversight by a plurality of church leaders throughout the NT church in virtually every known area and acknowledged or commended by virtually every NT writer who writes about church leadership. In the Apostolic Council the apostles acknowledge and submit to the government of elders/overseers, as do the Jerusalem church, the Christians in Antioch, which was the center for the Gentile mission, and the churches established on the Gentile mission (Acts 15, especially vv. 2, 4, 6, 22, 23, 16:4; cf. 21:25). Every church in which leadership is referred to in Asia Minor either under Paul and his associates or under Peter's ministry has a plurality of leadership (Acts 14:23; 20:17; 28; 1 Tim. 3:1ff.; 5:17; Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 5:1–4, note 1:1 for the provinces of Asia Minor where the addressees lived). Key churches of Achaia and Macedonia have such a leadership, i.e., Philippi (Phil. 1:1), Thessalonica (1 Thess. 5:12, 13), and Corinth (1 Cor. 12:28). The island of Crete is urged to establish such a pattern (Titus 1:5ff.), and the communities written to by James (5:14) and the writer of Hebrews (13:7, 17) know the same pattern. We may assume that Barnabas continued the same pattern that he and Paul had established at Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (Acts 14:23) when he returned to Cyprus (Acts 15:39). Only Rome and its geographical area provide us with no explicit information because Paul's letter does not deal explicitly with the subject. But it may well be that Paul's very general list of personal gifts in Rom. 12:6–8 implies a similar approach to that of 1 Cor. 12:28 with the terms, *ho didaskon*, *ho proistamenos*, and *diakonian*.[74]

Presbyterian churches believe that this consistent pattern, plainly followed throughout the New Testament age, justifies their enacting what they view as the

"divine right [*jus divinum*]" form of Presbyterian church government[75]—government by pluralities of elders/overseers in each church who in turn are accountable to higher courts of elders/overseers with whom they serve in parity one with another. Not to be so governed, they believe, is to reject the unique and absolute headship of Christ over his church and to substitute sinful human authority in its place. And to do this, they believe, is serious error, not as serious, of course, as the denial of the virgin birth and/or the deity of Jesus Christ or his substitutionary atonement but serious error nonetheless in that it will inhibit the church from mirroring properly the unity and diversity envisioned for it by Holy Scripture.

Responses to Robert L. Reymond's Presbyterian Polity

Response by James R. White

The reader will notice that the presentation made by Dr. Reymond parallels my own in a number of very important ways. We both stand firmly in defense of the sufficiency of the Scriptures to define the very form and function of Christ's church. If we do not begin here, there is no hope of coming to any meaningful conclusion. I agree with him wholeheartedly that we cannot possibly believe that Christ would leave his bride without clear and sufficient direction concerning the form of government that would mark his church. The bride of Christ hears the voice of her Master in his Word, the Scriptures. And while it may well be very common in our modern world to dismiss the Scriptures as a disparate collection of self-contradictory writings, Christ's faithful people continue to hear his voice in those God-breathed writings.

We also agree wholeheartedly on the fact that the local church is to have a plurality of elders who are chosen to give guidance and direction to the church. It was a part of God's providential wisdom to have the apostles appoint elders in the churches as a part of "setting in order" the church. The reader will note that we both made the same arguments from the same passages of Scripture on these vital points.

Where we disagree, of course, is with reference to the belief that the Scriptures present a "connectional government of graded courts (local "session," regional "presbytery," "General Assembly")." This "ecclesiastical connectionism" comprises a functional denial of the autonomy of the local church and of the local eldership. While there is everything proper and good in

recognizing the propriety of unity among churches in the promulgation of the gospel, it is a long leap to move from here to the creation of an entire judicial and administrative body existing alongside, and in many cases, above the local elders. The entire Presbyterian structure, which can be more or less complicated, depending on its particular expression, must be, it would seem, given the previous points of agreement and the assertion of the sufficiency of Scripture regarding its teaching on the form and function of the church, as clearly propounded as are the offices of elder and deacon in the local church. But the reader will notice that the arguments brought forward, focusing upon Acts 15 primarily, are arguments based upon inference and supposition. It is assumed that the "church" at Antioch is actually a group of "churches" in an already formed "presbytery," for example. This is inferred from assumptions about how large the church would have been in Antioch. But this kind of argumentation is always inherently dangerous and can be misused.

Four main arguments were presented for the Presbyterian form of government over against that of a plurality of elders in local churches without an overarching ecclesiastical structure above them. The first and most important is that of Acts 15 and the assertion that the "Jerusalem council" provides a basis for believing in a form of "connectionalism." As this is the most important argument, I will respond to it in length. The other three arguments, however, can be addressed more briefly, and I shall do so first.

Dr. Reymond wrote:

> In light of the biblical emphasis, then, on *visible* Christian unity and "oneness"…why, Presbyterians wonder, do Congregationalists put so much emphasis upon—indeed, even glory in as one of their distinctives—local church autonomy, self-consciously making their *independency* from each other and from other denominational churches a major reason for claiming "bragging rights" over Presbyterian connectionalism so far as their form of church government reflecting the teaching of the New Testament is concerned?

Such an assertion assumes a form of independency that I surely do not advocate. Dr. Reymond assumes that to be *independent* means you must be *isolated*, and this is a key issue to lay to rest. *Independence* does not mean the local church and her elders and deacons are *isolated* from the body of Christ: it simply means the highest level of *mandatory, biblical organization* is that of the God-ordained elders. The term *independence* is unfortunate in that it strikes one as speaking of a desire for separation, when in fact it is simply rejecting, on clear

and compelling biblical grounds (based upon the demands of the consistent application of *sola scriptura*) the creation of traditionally driven ecclesiastical structures that end up subjugating the eldership of the church to a higher "court" or "authority." It does not mean each local church becomes an island in the ecclesiastical ocean, nor that the members of that assembly are precluded from exercising their gifts in the common good of all believers. It does not preclude cooperation in missions work, education, or local outreach.

Dr. Reymond uses the preposition *from* in "from each other" improperly. Independence does not mean isolation *from* fellow believers but independence from nonbiblical ecclesiastical structures. The over-all impression offered by these words surely does not represent the form of biblically based local church governance that I have proposed and support. He then added, *"But where in Scripture is there any mandate at all for such independency among local Christian congregations?"* The proper question is, Where is the clear, Scriptural mandate for the creation of "graded courts" above the offices plainly laid out in Scripture? Proper biblical independency comes from the way in which the Lord, through his apostles, set the church in order. Since they did not create a structure that would subjugate local churches to "courts" never mentioned or noted in Scripture, the result is biblical independency. No "mandate" is needed outside of that which comes from the belief that our form of church government should be established by the apostles in the Scriptures.

The call for visible ecclesiastical unity is a strong one. But since this did not require the creation of an extrabiblical organization in apostolic days, I fail to see how things have changed today. Ecclesiastical unity is not a function of graded courts or organizations, as history has taught us over and over again. The only unity that lasts and that glorifies God is that unity that is based upon a passion for God's truth, a passion for the gospel. Extrabiblical ecclesiastical organizations have been tremendously effective in creating *disunity* over time. Presbyterianism's history surely shows us that division is not stopped by embracing this form of church government. Instead, such a denominational structure can be, and has been, used to *accelerate* the dissemination of false teachings (most notably in the history of Presbyterian liberalism), leading to further divisions and the establishment of new denominations.

The next argument was based upon the purpose of the Spirit's gifts, that being the building up of the body. He then concludes as a result, "Presbyterians believe that only a *visible* form of connectionalism between local church bodies through graded courts such as their own does justice to the unity of the body of Christ and reflects the appropriate awareness of Christians' mutual need for and

dependence upon each other." Of course, those who reject an overarching ecclesiastical structure above that of elders and deacons in the local church do not find anything in this argumentation too compelling. We believe the gifts of the Spirit are indeed for the edification of the body, and we exercise those gifts both within the context of the local body to which we have been joined, and among our fellow believers outside that body as well. Nothing in recognizing the proper role of the gifts of the Spirit leads us to believe this requires the creation of an ecclesiastical structure never once mentioned in the pages of Scripture.

Dr. Reymond argues a series of "details" that he believes likewise imply Presbyterian connectionalism. He notes various uses of the term *church*, assuming a number of times that though the inspired writer used the singular "church" of the "church" at Ephesus or Antioch (Acts 11:26; 13:1; 14:27; 20:17, 28) that this actually represents congregations joined in some form of Presbyterian form of church government. All of these "details" however could only be relevant to a form of independency which I surely do not represent or commend. There is obviously a middle-ground between *isolation* and the rejection of extrabiblical ecclesiastical structures. There is God-honoring cooperation and sharing in ministry that does not require the elders of the local church to become subject to "graded courts" above them. As I have opportunity to travel the country and speak in a wide variety of churches, I see this Spirit-born cooperation with regularity. But such does not in any way imply the need of a Presbyterian form of church governance.

The Primary Text: Acts 15

Presbyterian "connectionalism" is based almost entirely upon the implication-driven arguments drawn from the Jerusalem council of Acts 15. This gathering of apostles and elders from two churches to address the central issue of the nature of the gospel itself is used as the foundation upon which the entirety of the Presbyterian ecclesiastical structure, never once mentioned in Scripture, is derived. Despite the fact that nowhere in the history of the church as recorded in Scripture (including the pastoral Epistles, which would surely *have* to reflect the existence of such an organizational viewpoint) do we find anyone referring back to it as having functioned in this foundational fashion, we are assured that the wide range of "implications" derived from the event places it in the category of that which is properly designated "biblical." Though many, many opportunities existed to make reference to the council and the organizational implications derived therefrom, as we noted in the positive presentation, none of those

opportunities are taken to positively present the extended concept of graded courts and extrabiblical ecclesiastical structures.

Dr. Reymond provides a summary of conclusions he derives from the Jerusalem council. First, that the "Antioch presbytery" recognized that it did not have the authority to determine "church membership" and hence appealed to a higher authority. Paul and Barnabas were "deputed" by the "Antioch presbytery" to go to Jerusalem to represent Antioch in the deliberations.

The second argument is very important and hence I quote it:

> The appeal made by the Antioch presbytery to the apostles (*acting as elders in the church*) and the Jerusalem presbytery resulted in the Antioch elders/overseers meeting as delegated commissioners with the Jerusalem presbytery in a general assembly. *Deliberating together*, they determined the condition of church membership for the *entire* church and rendered their decision in the form of a "letter" (Acts 15:23–29), which letter is referred to technically by many New Testament scholars as the "Apostolic Decree."

The third argument is that the decisions of the council were considered universal and binding on all the churches, and hence, "Clearly, the apostles and elders did not regard these congregations as independent and autonomous."

And finally the fourth argument drawn from the Jerusalem council is, in Dr. Reymond's direct words, "In order to confirm the Jerusalem assembly's 'rules' and to provide any requested explanation of their meaning to the original 'lower court(s),' the assembly commissioned Judas and Silas both to convey to the Antioch church their letter and to confirm to them, as 'living Minutes of the Proceedings,' what the 'upper court' had decided."

In response I offer the following observations:

First, I must object to the frequent insertion of such ideas as "the Antioch presbytery" and such terminology as the "general assembly," when the text does not even *hint* at such things. This involves circular reasoning, assuming what has yet to be proven. The church (singular) at Antioch was troubled by men sent from James. The issue of table fellowship took place within a singular church. Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, seeing that this issue threatened the very "truth of the gospel," faced Peter directly over the issue and rebuked him. The meeting narrated in Acts 15 involved not merely the issue of "church membership" but of the very nature of the gospel of grace, as Dr. Reymond elsewhere recognizes. This was not an issue where the singular church at Antioch sought out a "higher court" in a Presbyterian form of church government. Apostles and elders were

involved in setting straight the very nature of the gospel of grace itself, and the results were recorded for us in inspired Scripture, *something far beyond anything any "general assembly" could claim for itself.* As was noted in my original presentation: *The Acts 15 events were unique, apostolic, and inspired.*

In regards to the second argument, it should be noted that Dr. Reymond provides a footnote in which he seeks to establish what might be called the "nonapostolic" nature of the Jerusalem council. That is, in his footnote he writes:

> I say "acting as elders in the church" here because there is no indication anywhere in Luke's account of the assembly's proceedings that Peter or Paul "pulled rank" on the assembly and appealed to their apostolic authority *per se*, which they could have done, to settle the case for the church. Rather, Luke portrays the assembly as a "deliberative" body.

This is a vital point for the Presbyterian position. If Acts 15 is apostolic, it becomes nonrepetitive and far less useful as a foundation for the creation of the graded system of courts and "connectionalism" being presented. Hence it is emphasized that the council was "deliberative" just as a General Assembly might be. And yet it is clear that the council itself claimed Holy Spirit guidance for its decisions (Acts 15:28), a claim that is borne out by the presence of apostles and the inclusion of the proceedings in God-breathed Scripture. This effort simply fails the test of consistency and scriptural context, and the decision, while impacting "church membership" did so because it spoke to the heart of the gospel itself. The event simply does not provide the foundation claimed for it.

The third argument follows closely on the second: the decision reached by the apostles and elders, given by the Holy Spirit, was considered binding upon all. Of course, anything inspired, given by the Holy Spirit and promulgated by apostles, is binding upon all. Such hardly provides a basis for the conclusion drawn, that being that the apostles did not consider the churches autonomous. No one said they did, for no one asserts the local churches were not under *apostolic* authority. The question is, of course, does that apostolic authority pass to some extrabiblical ecclesiastical structure derived from implied arguments from Acts 15? We believe not.

Finally, the fourth argument, in light of the preceding observations, speaks for itself. The language in which it speaks is foreign to both the New Testament and the ancient church. The idea of "courts" and "proceedings" may well be deeply entrenched in Presbyterian polity, but it is anachronistic in the exegesis of the text of Scripture.

Response by James Leo Garrett, Jr.

I am in agreement with Dr. Reymond that in the New Testament "bishops or overseers" and "elders" are two roles to be exercised by "the same officeholder," recognizing the validity of the case set forth by Joseph Barber Lightfoot in *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (1868),[76] but I would add "pastors" (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1–2) to the equation.

Dr. Reymond seems initially to wish to build his case primarily on the pastoral Epistles, but in fact he bases much of his case on considerations of Acts 13:1–3 and Acts 15. Elders-overseers, according to the Presbyterian system, although elected by the congregation—the election being reckoned to be consistent with the will of Christ, have their authority from Christ. They are not merely "to carry out" the will of the congregation but "to rule and to oversee the congregation" "in conformity with the revealed Word of God," "not primarily in agreement with the will of the congregation." This means that only elders (or overseers) can discern truthfully the meaning of the canonical Scriptures as such is to be applied to the life and ministry of the congregation. Through much of church history this pattern has fit well with the dominance of the landed gentry, the merchant classes, and/or the more educated churchmen and the secondary role of others in the church.

With respect to Acts 14:23, some commentators (C. K. Barrett[77]) are quite certain that the selecting of elders for every church was done solely by Paul and Barnabas, while others (Horatio B. Hackett,[78] John B. Polhill[79]) see the question as a disputed matter. But John Calvin,[80] equating these "elders" with pastors, held that they were elected by "the people" with Paul and Barnabas acting as "chief moderators," and Albert Barnes,[81] a Presbyterian pastor in Philadelphia, likewise concluded that the two "presided in the assembly when the choice was made."

Presbyterians, according to Dr. Reymond, insist "that the New Testament teaches in broad outline that the churches of the apostolic age were bound together by a connectional government of graded courts (local 'session,' regional 'presbytery,' 'general assembly')." This may be a network of unproved hypotheses. The existence of more than one church must be assumed in both Jerusalem and Antioch. Both Jerusalem and Antioch must be assumed to have had bodies of elders-overseers, when Acts 13:1 mentions only "prophets and teachers." The elders-overseers of these several churches within one city must be assumed to have acted in concert on a regular basis. The Jerusalem conference (Acts 15) must be understood to have been "a general assembly," as does Dr.

Reymond, unlike Louis Berkhof, even though “general assembly,” used in Hebrews 12:23, is not used in Acts 15 and even though no non-Presbyterian exegete is cited in support or confirmation.

Furthermore, Dr. Reymond interprets the decision of Acts 15:22 to be “a decree” by the General Assembly, omitting any reference to *sun hole te ekklesia* (“with the whole church”). He discusses at length the wisdom and propriety of the Jerusalem decision, but this is not a matter of dispute. Nor does he recognize sufficiently the one-time or singular significance of this Jerusalem decision, made by the participation of “apostles” as well as “elders,” especially as Paul and Silas were enjoining its obedience on the second missionary journey (Acts 16:4).

Neither our Lord's high priestly prayer (John 17), the sevenfold unity of Ephesians 4:3–6, 1 Corinthians 10:17, nor 1 Corinthians 12:12–13 can individually or collectively resolve or define church order. Dr. Reymond tends to confuse the unity of Christian fellowship with methods of church governance. He scolds the practitioners of Congregational polity but does not tell his readers how he lives out visible unity (his term is the “visible church catholic”) with those under papal polity.

Dr. Reymond's argument would imply that during the era of the apostles the Christian churches of Jerusalem, Antioch of Syria, Lystra, Derbe, Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, and Rome were linked together by a system of transcongregational courts. Not only is the New Testament totally silent concerning such a system, but also Paul, in taking the offering for poor Jewish Christians in Judea from Gentile churches, would, if such existed, doubtless have appealed to or utilized the authority of such courts to enforce his plea for the offering (1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 8–9).

The fact that Paul the apostle identified various “spiritual gifts” such as serving, teaching, leadership, helps, and administration does not indicate the structure of church life in which those gifts are to be exercised.

Dr. Reymond places a Presbyterial grid over the uses of *ekklesia* in the Acts of the Apostles, converting the prevalent usage of the singular, *ekklesia*, into implied *ekklesiai* so as to posit a plurality of churches (congregations) in each of the cities of Jerusalem, Antioch, and Ephesus prior to the writing of Acts, apart from any clear textual evidence for all having such, in an effort to secure New Testament support for presbyterial polity. Dubiously he interprets “the whole church” in Acts 15:22 to include Christians from Antioch and possibly from Syria and Cilicia, when the reference is to sending Judas Barsabbas and Silas to

Antioch. How could Christians in Syria and Cilicia have possibly helped to make this decision? Only by questionable assumptions does one reach that conclusion.

The widespread usage of figures or images for the church in the New Testament does not settle the question of church order or governance except as such usage encourages the unity of believers. Likewise, the Pauline offering for poor Jewish Christians in Judea does not resolve the issue of polity, for brotherhood and voluntary offerings are not identical with polity or governance. The same may be said of "the *one* law-free gospel," the circulation of the Epistle of James and of the Pauline epistles, assistance to itinerant evangelists, and the naming of heretics and troublemakers. Dr. Reymond mistakenly assumes that if Congregational polity were to be recognized as having been practiced in the New Testament era, one must thereby necessarily conclude that the churches had no relationship whatsoever.

Dr. Reymond reports that elder-governed polity suffered "slippage" by the second century AD and that the "hierarchical episcopacy" prevailed after Cyprian, although Jerome and Augustine later found no basis for it in the New Testament. He acknowledges that John Calvin's Genevan restoration fell short of "full-blown Presbyterianism" inasmuch as it lacked "one upper court," presumably a general assembly. We know that Calvin obtained his four ministerial offices (pastor, teacher, elder, and deacon) by taking two of the five terms (i.e., pastor, teacher)[82] used in Ephesians 4:11, thus assuming that the other three (apostles, prophets, evangelists) were not applicable to the sixteenth century, and presumably by drawing "elder" and "deacon" from 1 Timothy 3:1–10.

The case for differentiating teaching elders and ruling elders is not as obvious as Dr. Reymond would seem to imply. Why should Romans 12:6–8 be cited in support when Paul lists seven gifts and does not group any two in pairs? Likewise in 1 Corinthians 12:28 Paul lists eight gifts without grouping any two as pairs or putting them as antitheses? With Ephesians 4:11 taken as one pastoral-teaching office and with 1 Timothy 5:17 as referring to some non-preaching, nonteaching elders, who may not be in essence rulers, the case is actually rather shaky.[83] Indeed, as to 1 Timothy 5:17, some modern exegetes[84] understand *presbyteroi* as "older men" rather than as church officers, Justin Martyr used *proestetes* to refer to the one who presides over the Eucharist,[85] and several modern English translations of the New Testament[86] do not follow the KJV, the ASV, and the RSV in using "rule well" but rather employ the language

of leadership.

Dr. Reymond provides for his readers a guided tour of the differing Presbyterian views as to the locus and direction of authority according to Presbyterian polity. These I summarize as follows:

Scottish aristocratic view:

- highest authority = the General Assembly
- Authority flows downward to the lower courts.

Democratic view of W. Cunningham, J. Bannerman, and L. Berkhof:

- highest authority = the local church session
- Authority flows upward to the higher courts.

Middle view of Samuel Rutherford and Robert L. Reymond:

- authority immediately given to the congregation by Christ;
- authority immediately given to the presbytery by Christ;
- hence no flow of authority downward or upward

Although these three distinctive views are important for Presbyterian history and do have important implications, they are not determinative for the debate on church polity inasmuch as all three posit the same structure of church courts.

Moreover, an exegesis of 1 Timothy 3:2–12 and Titus 1:6–9 so as to identify the qualifications for elders (overseers) and deacons and the collation of other New Testament texts as to their duties do not provide major issues that separate the basic polities. In addition, churches that practice Congregational polity normally authorize a body of ordained pastors (and also often deacons) to examine and recommend candidates for ordination. Under whatever polity one may find oneself, the New Testament admonitions as to servanthood and spiritual weaponry are always needed and appropriate.

Dr. Reymond is rightly perturbed about the failures or abuses of Congregational polity, but he could have been more open to recognize its successes. He, being quite certain that Presbyterial polity is biblical and "provides…essential 'checks and balances,'" has not taken notice of the inability of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) during recent years to deal decisively with homosexuality, abortion, and related issues.

The “system of church courts” polity which Dr. Reymond so strongly advocates may be more closely linked to forms of representative government in the modern political order than to the Christian churches of the New Testament era.

Response by Paul F. M. Zahl

I have been waiting for Dr. Reymond's essay for decades. I have wanted explained to me, clearly, the reason that orthodox Presbyterians feel so strongly about their system of church government. What is “divine right” (*ius divinum*) Presbyterianism, and why has it been proposed down the years as the way to govern the Christian church? Why did holy men like Samuel Rutherford and the Scottish Covenanters give up everything for the sake of their polity? What is it about the Presbyterian claim that has animated thousands of people to defend their view even with force, and to give their lives? Christian martyrs there have been in every period but not so often for the sake of a form, or what feels like a form. Now I understand. Those who read this book will owe Robert Reymond a debt, in particular.

Reymond's essay is extremely clear. It is not, however, short. I was reminded of General Burgoyne's question to the imprisoned (and also impostor) Presbyterian minister in George Bernard Shaw's play, “The Devil's Disciple.” The general asks his man, “Just what is a Presbyterian, sir? I have always wanted to know.” The wily prisoner replies, “Just how many days do you have?” Dr. Reymond's answer to the question is a heavy, lengthy read. It is also unambiguous and completely plain.

All this is not to say that I agree with a single word of it. Well, I agree with a few points, and a footnote or two, yes. But the overall tone of the piece is high-church—high-church in the extreme. To this Protestant Episcopalian, the effect of the argument is to elevate church government or polity to a primary or ultimate place in defining Christian identity (i.e., the *esse* theory of church) rather than a secondary or penultimate place (i.e., the *bene esse* theory of church). The author believes that Presbyterianism is God's way, God's anointed way. If Dr. Reymond is correct, then I, together with every other Bible-reading Christian, have no choice but to become Presbyterian. It is the only way forward. Any other Protestant position disregards the anointed teaching of Scripture, the very teachings of Christ himself.

All this means that while I admire the edifice and observe its beautiful consistency, I also regard it as weighted wrongly, oriented incorrectly, in view of

other principal features of Christian identity. Its scale in the landscape of Bible truth is simply too large.

What is wrong with the picture?

It is a matter of scale. Because Reymond believes that on the subject of church government Scripture has plainly spoken—or rather, that the Lord has spoken plainly through his Word—he wants to regard polity as more important than many other Protestants have done. The premise is that the Bible speaks unambiguously, with no dissonant or diverse witness, on the subject. There is also the premise that the issue is of enormous, crucial weight. For myself, I reject both premises.

To the first premise, that Scripture speaks unambiguously concerning church government, I part company with Reymond right from his opening argument. He wants to present an airtight case, "that the Presbyterian form of church government alone passes biblical muster—that is, governance of the church by elders/overseers in graded courts, with those officers executing the responsibilities of their office in unison and on a parity with each other, and with the material care and service of the church being looked after by deacons…under the supervision of the elders/overseers." That is apparently the crux of Presbyterianism, and Reymond repeats the definition many times. I appreciate the repetition, as the reader knows exactly where he or she stands.

The first Bible example of Presbyterianism that is given is the example of the Sanhedrin (*presbyterion*). I find this example alarming. The author does acknowledge that the trial of Jesus is not the moral high point in Presbyterian history.

But the big arguments in favor of Presbyterianism are found elsewhere. First, they are found in reference to the apostolic council or assembly as described in Acts 15. Reymond studies that council painstakingly. He wishes to see it as a "connectional" and happy meeting of the minds between the Antioch "presbytery" and the Jerusalem "presbytery." I myself see it as a vulnerable and extremely fragile compromise reached between Judaizing Christians (Peter and the Jerusalem Church) and grace-offering Christians (Paul and the Antioch Gentiles). It was not the fully successful solution that Reymond portrays, but a concession to Paul that bore within itself the seeds of legalism (i.e., the Noahic code remaining in force for Gentiles). The author wants to see this, together with Raymond E. Brown, as "the most important meeting ever held in the history of Christianity." This is to give it too much importance! It was, like most church meetings, a flawed attempt at compromise. But for Reymond, the "Jerusalem

assembly stands as a great exemplar of the effort to reach balanced decisions in the life of the church through Spirit-directed deliberation."

The second Bible argument brought out to underwrite Presbyterian connectionalism is the high priestly prayer of John 17. Reymond interprets Christ's prayer for unity as a prayer for visible, concrete unity; for institutional, formal unity. For him John 17 rips up all forms of local or congregational independency.

The third Bible argument is drawn from Paul's theology of the Holy Spirit within the body of Christ. Mutual submission equals Presbyterianism. But why can't mutual submission occur in an independent, or for that matter in a liberally worked out Episcopal polity?

Finally, Reymond sees the whole force of the word *ecclesia* in the New Testament as resting in Presbyterian-type fellowship and brotherhood. Now there becomes not one single verse in the Bible relating to church that does not sustain the Presbyterian or conciliar-connectional case.

I have no problem with the author's further points that Episcopacy arose in the second century—late, in other words—nor with his view that *presbyteros* and *episkopos* are equivalent terms in the New Testament. What I do have problems with is his monocular and overly systematizing exegesis. And of course, if the Bible really teaches Presbyterianism and no other form of church government, then we must all become Presbyterian. Is this what animated Rutherford and Owen?

I have another question for the author. Why is Dr. Reymond a minister of the PCA and not, say, of the PCUSA or the OPC or the EPC? I assume it is on doctrinal grounds, which I admire. Or might it be on ecclesiological grounds? Are PCA folk better Presbyterians, more thorough in the matter of polity, than members of other Presbyterian denominations? I am not talking about theology. I really want to know: Is there a "Gnesio-Presbyterianism" in relation to church government as there is a "Gnesio-Lutherianism" in relation to justification?

The whole scale of Reymond's construction seems to me to be off. He values church order just so highly. I wish to place comparable weight on soteriology and Christology. Perhaps he does, as well. He indicates this reassuringly, in his concluding sentence. But it looks overall as if church government has become of such significance that it would be church-dividing. Just as I am no high-church Episcopalian, I do not wish to trade Laudian prelacy for divine-right Presbyterianism.

Response by Daniel L. Akin

Let me begin by expressing my love and appreciation for Robert Reymond. He has been a champion of orthodox Christianity and a wonderful gift to the church of our Lord Jesus Christ. I thank God for what he has meant to the gospel. The chapter by Dr. Reymond had the sharpest edge of the four I read. This does not mean that I do not appreciate strong conviction in presenting one's views. That style of discussion and debate is far too rare in a day when sentimentalism, tolerance, and fear of "hurt feelings" receives a far greater place at the table than is deserved. It does mean that his chapter was presented with "the sharpest edge," and the certainty that his position, and his position alone, is correct. There is an old saying that goes something like this when preaching a sermon: "When you have a weak point, preach louder." Though I would not even begin to make a blanket statement that this is what Dr. Reymond does throughout his chapter, there are a number of occasions where the shoe may fit or the blanket may be laid.

On several points I wish to commend Dr. Reymond's chapter. First, it is excellently researched and well documented from beginning to end. Second, he rightly begins by criticizing many evangelicals for determining their church government "on an *ad hoc* or pragmatic basis." In my own denomination that is a valid and, unfortunately, accurate observation. He rightly adds that "this view unwittingly calls into question the great Protestant doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture alone in matters of both faith and practice." Third, he engages throughout his chapter the biblical data, providing excellent word studies (*presbuteros* and *episkopos*), surveys of crucial texts related to the offices of and expectations for the church's ministers, and a fine discussion of the scriptural qualification these men must meet. Fourth, he is correct in affirming "that the church is *not* a pure democracy." Elders/pastors do not simply serve at the pleasure of the congregation. Fifth, Dr. Reymond correctly notes that the Jerusalem council reached its decisions with the assembly, under the influence of James, rendering their decision. This, however, supports my position more than Dr. Reymond's! Sixth, Dr. Reymond provides a fine survey of Presbyterianism in church history. However, even here his edge is sharp and he claims biblical support where even many of his own Presbyterian brethren would not. Calvin's Geneva was not James's Jerusalem.

Let me now move to points of criticism, of which there are a number.

First, and not surprising, there is no mention or theological analysis of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and the impact of this doctrine on

ecclesiology. This is simply inadequate for anyone who wishes to build a doctrine of church polity that is full and comprehensive in handling all that the Bible contributes to such a discussion. It also ignores one of the major contributions of the Reformation.

Second, and absolutely lethal to Dr. Reymond's argument, is the absence of a discussion of church discipline and those crucial texts that address this issue. In each and every instance the whole body of believers is called to be involved (e.g., Matt. 18; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2). As Dr. Garrett and I show, this issue alone demands some form of local church Congregationalism. Dr. Reymond and Presbyterianism have no adequate answer for this basic truth.

Third, throughout the article Dr. Reymond implies that Presbyterians are the only ones to appeal to Holy Scripture alone for their doctrine. Does he really mean this? Infant baptism? Baptism by sprinkling? Church courts set and formed in the first century? His affirmation simply cannot stand on the plain reading of Scripture.

Fourth, his early statement that "Presbyterianism (governance by elders/overseers) has a long history in the Bible" reads more into the biblical data than is there. That there were elders, for example, in the Old Testament, I acknowledge and demonstrate in my chapter. That these elders functioned in a manner similar to modern Presbyterian polity is simply incorrect. Interestingly, even Dr. Reymond notes that "with the passing of the apostles…the churches were to be governed by councils of elders/overseers *chosen by the congregation*" (italics mine). Am I missing something here? (Or is Dr. Reymond?)

Fifth, Dr. Reymond's argument for "ecclesiastical connectionalism" is one of the weaker aspects of his chapter. Here he knows what he wants to find and he does his very best to find it. However, it is not there. To cut to the chase, Acts clearly reflects a bottom-up form of connectionalism or cooperation model, not the reverse. The church at Antioch voluntarily went up to Jerusalem in Acts 15; they were not called there. In addition, one searches the New Testament in vain for the "graded courts" of local "session," regional "presbytery," and "general assembly" Dr. Reymond so confidently asserts is there. In this instance, there is no there, there! Dr. Reymond must resort in this section to words like "imply" and "strongly suggest."

Sixth, there is an unfortunate misrepresentation of dispensationalism at footnote 27. Dr. Reymond is so up-to-date at this point he cites the Scofield Reference Bible of 1917! To be fair, you would think he would refer to modern

writers of this tradition like Charles Ryrie, or even better, Craig Blaising, Darrell Bock, Robert Saucy, and Bruce Ware. Modern dispensationalists should at least be critiqued for what they believe, not what was said in a study note in 1917.

Seventh, Dr. Reymond misrepresents Congregationalism where he says it believes “the local church has the right to determine for itself the requirements for church membership, and for that matter everything else.” Such a straw man is unworthy of Dr. Reymond.

Eighth, I believe Baptists are just as interested “in *visible* Christian unity” and “oneness” as Presbyterians. We are convinced that it, by its very nature, will/must be voluntary. Neither Baptists nor Presbyterians, however, have any reason to boast at this point.

Ninth, and this is something of a minor point, Dr. Reymond notes in Acts 11:27–30 that the Antioch church sent a monetary gift for the church at Jerusalem. It certainly does reflect “the church's sense of oneness with the brotherhood in Jerusalem.” It reflects in no way Presbyterian connectionalism. The gift was sent autonomously and voluntary.

Tenth, congregational autonomy does not imply “congregational independency” as Dr. Reymond asserts. This is quite evident in the Southern Baptist Convention. Dr. Reymond is again guilty of a straw man argument.

Eleventh, how Dr. Reymond can address the Great Awakening, even from a Presbyterian perspective, and not even mention Edwards, Wesley, and Whitefield, is beyond me.

Twelfth, Presbyterianism's separation of “teaching elder” and “ruling elder,” which Dr. Reymond affirms, does not pass scriptural muster. In my article I point out that the terms do not appear in this way until Calvin. It is a modern, not a biblical, invention.

Thirteenth, Dr. Reymond again reads more into the text of Scripture than is justified. Romans 12:7–8 and 1 Corinthians 12:28 say absolutely nothing about “teaching elders” and “ruling elders.” Further, “ruling elder” is not a biblical term or category. Scripture indicates that all elders teach and that all elders exercise authority (i.e., rule).

Fourteenth, there is no “church” in the Old Testament. Jesus promised its future constitution in Matthew 16. Acts 2 is the birthday of the church.

Fifteenth, to say that a “connectional system of graded courts reflects the unity of the church catholic, regional, and local” is more a pipedream than reality, at least in the ecclesiastical world we all live in. Which Presbyterian body

does Dr. Reymond have in mind (PCA, PCUSA, Cumberland, Second Cumberland, just to name four)?

Sixteenth, Dr. Reymond reads more into the issue of ordination than Scripture warrants. Then again, so do most Baptists.

Seventeenth, Dr. Reymond warns that “the Christian church in our day is about to self-destruct because of its abandonment of biblical government, which it in turn has fostered abandonment in many quarters of the gospel itself.” I wonder if Dr. Reymond realizes how much he sounds like a Catholic in saying this? Actually, the order is the opposite of what he asserts. Abandonment of the gospel, and all its implications, is where the problem is located.

Finally, even to imply that Congregationalism is responsible for Jonestown and Waco, Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, and Jesse Jackson types is both irresponsible and unjustified. It adds nothing to our discussion.

In conclusion, Dr. Reymond's argument for a Presbyterian polity is strongly asserted but inadequately defended. The reason is quite simple: Scripture is not on his side.

CHAPTER 3

The Congregation-Led Church

Congregational Polity

JAMES LEO GARRETT, JR.

What Is Congregational Polity?

The church polity or governance known as “Congregational” has been normally differentiated from other types of church polity either by a threefold or a fourfold differentiation. The threefold, common to Baptist authors, has demarcated Episcopal, Presbyterial, and Congregational types of polity.[1] The fourfold, found among non-Baptist authors, has distinguished Papal, Episcopal, Presbyterial, and Congregational types.[2]

The present author proposes to define and to defend Congregational polity as follows: it is that form of church governance in which final human authority rests with the local or particular congregation when it gathers for decision-making. This means that decisions about membership, leadership, doctrine, worship, conduct, missions, finances, property, relationships, and the like are to be made by the gathered congregation except when such decisions have been delegated by the congregation to individual members or groups of members.

The term “final human authority” suggests that the church is under divine authority, and this is most often described in terms of the lordship of Jesus Christ and the leadership of the Holy Spirit. The term “the local or particular congregation” is designed to identify a congregation in distinction from ecclesiastical judicatories or denominational bodies. The term “gathers for decision-making” implies that the whole congregation is responsible for such decision-making and that each member has a voice or vote in such. Consequently,

> It is the intention under congregational polity that the congregation govern itself under the lordship of Jesus Christ (Christocracy) and with the

> leadership of the Holy Spirit (pneumatophoria) with no superior or governing ecclesial bodies (autonomy) and with every member having a voice in its affairs and its decisions (democracy).[3]

Congregational polity can be practiced according to different patterns. This is true both externally and internally. In terms of relations to other congregations, congregations may practice either "independent Congregational polity" or "cooperative or interdependent Congregational polity." According to the former, a congregation chooses "not to associate on a sustained basis with other congregations or to affiliate with and support denominational or interdenominational bodies for missionary, educational, benevolent, or other purposes." According to the latter, a congregation freely chooses "to associate with other congregations 'of like faith and order' and to affiliate with and support denominational bodies for missionary, educational, benevolent, or other purposes."[4]

In terms of the internal life of the congregation, Congregational polity admits of different structures such as the pastor and deacons structure, the pastor-deacons-committees structure, and the pastor-deacons-committees-church council structure. In every case, however, the units within the structure are subject to the final authority of the congregation.

The New Testament

In the New Testament are there passages that in some sense relate to or are suggestive of Congregational polity? By this question we mean texts which can be said to have a direct, not merely an inferential, relationship to such governance. We would answer by listing six passages: Matthew 18:15–20; Acts 6:3; 13:2–3; 15:22; 1 Corinthians 5:2; and 2 Corinthians 2:6. Each of these is now carefully examined.

Matthew 18:15–20

For analysis we shall examine separately verses 15–17, verse 18, verse 19, and verse 20. The RSV rendering of verses 15–17 is as follows:

> If your brother sins (*hamartese*) against you, go and tell him his fault (*elegkson auton*), between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained (*ekerdesas*) your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed (*stathe*) by the evidence (*stomatos*) of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to hear them,

tell it to the church (*eipon te ekklesia*); and if he refuses to listen even to the church (*kai tes ekklesias*), let him be to you as (*esto soi hosper*) a Gentile (*ho ethnikos*) and a tax collector (*ho telones*).

Matthew 18:15–17 has been reckoned by some commentators as instruction about how to deal with a sinning or erring Christian brother: "how to deal with a brother who has wronged us" (John A. Broadus[5]), "the treatment of the erring brother" (David Hill[6]), and "personal confrontation" (Craig Blomberg[7]). By other commentators the passage is considered to be about church discipline: "the discipline of the church" (Johann Peter Lange[8]), "the model for church discipline" (Frank Stagg[9]), and "expulsion from the church—excommunication" (Ulrich Luz[10]). Various commentators take note of the four steps specified in the passage (Floyd V. Filson,[11] Stagg,[12] David E. Garland[13]), and not a few relate the text to similar teaching in the Qumran literature[14]: Filson,[15] Robert H. Mounce,[16] and Garland.[17] According to Douglas R. A. Hare, modern Christians have difficulty with the text because of their "very individualistic conception of sin."[18]

The words "tell it to the church" (18:17 RSV, NIV) have evoked interpretations from most all commentators on Matthew. A few (John Calvin,[19] A. Carr,[20] and John F. Walvoord[21]) have interpreted "church" (*ekklesia*) as referring to the Jewish synagogue. Another small group, chiefly Anglicans at the advent of the twentieth century (F. C. Cook,[22] unspecific author,[23] and David Smith[24]), identified the use of *church* here with that in Matthew 16:18 so as to conclude that the reference is to the universal church. John Gill in the eighteenth century thought "church" here meant the apostles,[25] and Albert Barnes[26] in the nineteenth century and H. N. Ridderbos[27] in the twentieth posited either the whole congregation or the congregation represented by elders. Garland noted the "four conditional sentences: (a) 'if your brother sins (against you);' (b) 'if he does not listen to you;' (c) 'if he ignores them;' (d) 'if he ignores the church.'" But the overwhelming majority of modern commentators, ranging from Roman Catholics and Anglicans to Baptists, Disciples of Christ, and members of the Churches of Christ, have interpreted "church" in Matthew 18:17 to mean a local or particular church, or a congregation of believers. For Henry Alford[28] the term referred to the one Jerusalem church, for Pierson Parker[29] to "the body of Jewish Christians," and for John A. Broadus[30] to "by anticipation…one of the churches founded by apostles" if not to "the body of Christ's disciples existing at the time he speaks." The remainder of the vast body of commentators have identified this

text with a local church or the local church.[31]

Although a very few commentators have concluded that Matthew 18:15–17 was not a genuine saying of Jesus but originated with the primitive church (William Barclay[32]) or that it was greatly modified by the primitive church (Theodore H. Robinson,[33] Ulrich Luz[34]), the great majority of commentators has regarded it as a genuine saying of Jesus.

We can thus claim Matthew 18:15–17 as a genuine utterance of Jesus. Furthermore, inasmuch as this text prescribes that when among Christians offenses, be they moral or relational, cannot be resolved through interpersonal or small-group efforts, they are to be referred to the local or particular congregation, the decision of which is to be final and to determine the continuance or noncontinuance of the offender in the congregation. Therefore, we conclude that Matthew 18:15–17 grants the authority of Jesus to such congregational decision-making and endorses such congregational governance.

The RSV translation of Matthew 18:18 is as follows: “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind (*desete*) on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose (*lysete*) on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

The interpretation of verse 18, for most commentators, centers more in its relationship to Matthew 16:19 than in its relationship to its context (18:15–17, 19–20). Four aspects of this relationship can be noted. First, whereas 16:19 uses singular verbs (“you bind,” *deses,* and “you loose,” *lyses,* RSV, NIV), 18:18 employs plural verbs (“you bind,” *desete*, and “you loose,” *lysete*).[35] Second, whereas in 16:19 the binding and loosing seem to refer to teaching or instruction, in 18:18 they seem to refer to discipline.[36] Third, whereas in 16:19 the binding and loosing are to be exercised by Simon Peter himself, in 18:18 they are to be exercised by others. Although a few commentators have concluded that the binding and the loosing in 18:18 were applied to the apostles only[37] or to church rulers in some generic sense,[38] the great majority of recent commentators has affirmed the application of the binding and loosing to the whole congregation or to all disciples.[39] Fourth, 18:18 is seen by most commentators[40] to authorize congregational excommunication or reconciliation, although Leon Morris[41] has taken it as authorizing congregational determination of forbidden and permitted conduct.

Matthew 18:19 reads as follows in the RSV: “Again, I say to you, if two of you agree (*symphonesosin*) on earth about anything (*peri pantos pragmatos*) they ask (*hou ean aitesontai*), it will be done for them (*genesetai autois*) by my

Father in heaven."

Three interpretations of this verse have tended to prevail among modern commentators. First, many have held that this is a general promise concerning the divine granting of agreed-upon petitionary or intercessory prayer.[42] Second, a fewer number have reckoned verse 19 to be a promise regarding prayer that is particularly related to church discipline.[43] Third, a significant group of recent commentators has opted for the view that verse 19 refers to disciplinary decisions or negotiated settlements with heavenly approval, not to prayer.[44] To opt for the third interpretation is to conclude that verse 19 pertains to congregational discipline or to extensions thereof.

The RSV translation of Matthew 18:20 is as follows: "For where two or three are gathered (*synegmenoi*) in my name, there am I (*ekei eimi*) in the midst of them (*en meso auton*)." Most all modern commentators have reckoned this saying as a genuine utterance of Jesus, but Reginald H. Fuller alleged that it "originated in post-Easter Christian prophecy"[45] and William D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., specified that it is a saying of "the risen Lord," not "of the pre-Easter Jesus."[46] Nineteenth-century commentators were prone to interpret the presence of Jesus in verse 20 as testimony to or guarantee of both Jesus' omnipresence and his deity.[47] At least sixteen commentators during the twentieth century have cited a parallel between verse 20 and the rabbinical saying (Pirke Aboth, 3:2): "If two sit together and the words of the Torah are spoken between them, the *Shekina* rests between them."

But as to the question of the central meaning of verse 18 the commentators have been divided. Three major interpretations (the traditional, the mediating, and the recent) have prevailed. The traditional interpretation has been that verse 20 is basically a prayer promise in general, with little connection to the context.[48]The mediating interpretation is that verse 20 is a saying about prayer that has special reference to the church discipline described in the preceding verses.[49] The predominantly recent[50] interpretation is that the saying applies to arbitrations or settlements as a phase of church discipline rather than to prayer.[51] The traditional interpretation affords no direct connection between verse 20 and congregational governance, but the mediating and the recent interpretations specifically connect the promise of the presence of Jesus Christ among his gathered disciples to the resolution of offenses between disciples and/or congregational exclusion.

Acts 6:3

Three texts in Acts are thought to be pertinent to the subject of church polity. One (6:3) pertains to the church in Jerusalem, the second (13:2–3) refers to the church in Antioch of Syria, and the third (15:22) applies to the relationship between these two churches.

Acts 6:3 is situated within the narrative of the selection of the Seven. The NIV translation reads: “Brethren, choose (episkepsasthe) seven men from among you (*eks hymon*) who are known to be full of the Holy Spirit, who are well thought of by everyone; and we will put them in charge (*katastesomen*) of this business.” The reference is to the proper distribution of food to the Hellenistic or Greek-speaking Jewish Christian widows.

The modern, and even premodern, English-language commentaries on Acts are almost unanimous in holding that the Seven were chosen by the entire congregation at Jerusalem.[52] Only a variant textual reading found in Codex Vaticanus (*B*), “Let *us* choose, brethren, seven men,” is suggestive that the apostles may have chosen the Seven.[53] Only occasionally a Roman Catholic commentator has declared that the Jerusalem church had a blend of “democratic” and “theocratic” polities[54] or an Anglican has contended that only a “representative body” of the Jerusalem church made the selection “since the numbers were now far too great to meet in any one place”[55] or a Presbyterian has declared that the Jerusalem church nominated the Seven but “the final decision” was made by the Twelve.[56]

Commentators on the Acts of the Apostles vary as to the precise manner of describing this congregational decision: “selection,”[57] “election,”[58] “choice,”[59] “common votes,”[60] “a right to vote,”[61] “popular vote,”[62] “a vote,”[63] “the popular voice,”[64] “unanimous concurrence,”[65] and “agreement by common consent.”[66] It was not by lots[67] but rather “strikingly in harmony with the Greek ideas attached to the word *Ecclesia*, as the assembly in which every citizen might take his share” so that “every member of the congregation…was invited, as having a right to vote.”[68]

The question as to whether the Seven are to be understood as deacons in the later sense[69] or are not to be so understood,[70] however resolved, does not affect the congregational nature of their selection. Nor is Hans Conzelmann's caveat that this installation “reflects the custom of the church at the time of Luke” and hence “is not to be used for the reconstruction of the polity of the early church” any telling argument against Congregationalism, since Conzelmann is assuming

the nonhistoricity of Acts 6:1–6 and thus not permitting its description to fall quite naturally within the era of the "early church"—what he describes normally as "the earliest church," or the church of the eyewitnesses prior to the Jerusalem council (Acts 15).[71]

Acts 13:2–3

Acts 13:2 is part of the narrative of the first extra-Jewish Christian mission. Verse 1 identifies five leaders ("prophets and teachers") of the church in Antioch of Syria: Barnabas, Symeon (called Niger), Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (the foster-brother of "Herod the tetrarch," that is, Herod Antipas), and Saul of Tarsus. The recurring use of the Greek conjunction *te* in verse 1 has led some commentators[72] to conclude that Luke thereby identified Barnabas, Symeon, and Lucius as "prophets" and Manaen and Saul as "teachers." Another[73] has interpreted these as belonging to one office, that is, congregational "prophetic teachers."

The translation of Acts 13:2 is identical in the RSV and the NIV: "While they (*auton*) were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart (*Aphorisate*) for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" Does "they" refer to the five prophets and teachers or to the entire congregation? Commentators who have addressed this question have favored the Congregational view,[74] especially since the other view would make the Holy Spirit's command to "separate" Barnabas and Saul a separation from within the five prophets and teachers. Rather Luke presented the Holy Spirit's mandate as being addressed to the entire Antiochean church.

But how did the Holy Spirit speak or communicate this command? Most commentators[75] indicate that it was by one or more of the prophets in Antioch. What was the significance of the verb *separate*? The word was used in the Septuagint when Moses spoke to Korah (Num. 16:9) and in reference to Aaron (1 Chron. 23:13) and was used by Paul to refer to his own birth (Gal. 1:15) and his apostleship (Rom. 1:1).[76] In Acts 13:2 "separate" means to "*set apart*, designate, implying separation from the rest, and from the ordinary work in which they had been all engaged, to another special and extraordinary business."[77] That which was extraordinary was the mission to the Gentiles.

Acts 13:3 (NIV) concludes the narration: "So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed (*epithentes*) their hands on them and sent them off (*apelysan*)." In the Greek text we do not "have the antecedent of the third person

verbal suffix ‘they’ (*apelysan*), and so we do not have the precise identification of the sentence's subject.”[78] But most commentators,[79] especially Anglicans, have concluded that only Symeon, Lucius, and Manaen laid hands on Barnabas and Saul. Yet Frank Stagg,[80] Richard N. Longenecker,[81]and Kenneth O. Gangel[82] have insisted that the entire church at Antioch laid hands on the two.

Furthermore, what was the significance of this laying on of hands? Anglican commentators at the beginning of the twentieth century tended to reckon this action as ordination to the apostolate83 to the Gentiles. More recent Roman Catholic commentators have identified the laying on of hands as either the handing over of ecclesiastical office and a sign of accompanying gifts of the Holy Spirit[84] or as invoking divine blessing upon those commissioned together with their ordination.[85] The remaining commentators on Acts have tended to opt chiefly for one of three views: consecration, blessing, or commissioning. Calvin[86] interpreted the laying on of hands as a consecration and offering to God. Lyman Abbott,[87]W. M. Furneaux,[88] A. T. Robertson,[89] and Ben Witherington III[90]regarded it as consecration to specific missionary service. Others—E. H. Plumptre,[91] A. W. F. Blunt,[92] F. F. Bruce,[93] and Hans Conzelmann[94]—interpreted the laying on of hands as a blessing for the missionary service which was being accepted. Still others—Albert Barnes,[95] J. A. Alexander,[96] J. V. Bartlet,[97] F. J . Foakes-Jackson,[98] R. C. H. Lenski,[99] C. S. C. Williams,[100] William Neil,[101] French L. Arrington,[102] John B. Polhill,[103] and Kenneth O. Gangel[104]—have understood this event as the commissioning or designation of Barnabas and Saul as missionaries to the Gentiles. Plural meanings of this laying on of hands have also been advocated.[105]

Congregational decision-making in Acts 13:2–3 (Antioch) is nearly as prominent in Acts 6:3 (Jerusalem). The gathered, fasting, praying, and worshipping Antioch church is thoroughly involved in the commissioning and release of Barnabas and Saul.

Acts 15:22

Acts 15 records the conference or council in the church at Jerusalem that was necessitated by the inquiry from the church in Antioch, being conveyed by Paul, Barnabas, and other Antiochene representatives, as to whether Gentile converts must be circumcised. Pharisaic Christian insistence on circumcision was countered by Peter's insistence that God had not discriminated against Gentile believers in giving the Holy Spirit and by the reports of God's mighty

work among Gentile believers given by Barnabas and Paul. Then James, being reluctant to impose any law upon Gentile congregations, proposed his fourfold response to and counsel for the church in Antioch: abstinence from food offered in idolatrous worship, from "sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood" (v. 20, NIV). Concerning circumcision there was silence. A letter to the Christians in Antioch and vicinity from the apostles and elders in Jerusalem was framed, and verse 22 indicates how it was to be sent:

> Then it seemed good (*edokse*) to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church (*syn hole te ekklesia*), to choose (*ekleksamenous*) men from among them (*eks auton*) and send (*pempsai*) them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading (*hegoumenous*) men among the brethren (RSV).

TEV, JB, and NIV translate *edokse* "decided," and NEB renders it "resolved."

Commentators on Acts have usually taken one of three options concerning the selection of Judas and Silas. One can play down the human and the ecclesial factors in the selection by asserting that the Holy Spirit alone chose these two men.[106] But three major interpretations have seemingly prevailed. First, a few have concluded that the Jerusalem church leaders—"the apostles and the elders"—chose Judas and Silas from their own ranks. F. F. Bruce[107](Plymouth Brethren) opted for this view, stating also that the church was the "vehicle" of the Holy Spirit, and Richard B. Rackham[108] (Anglican), being quite sure that Judas and Silas "were chosen out of the ruling body of the apostles and presbyters," was less specific as to how the decision was made. A second group of commentators—John Calvin[109] (Reformed), Albert Barnes[110](Presbyterian), H. Leo Boles[111] (Churches of Christ), and Richard N. Longenecker[112] (Baptist) —has contended that the apostles and elders nominated or proposed Judas and Silas and the Jerusalem church gave consent or confirmed the choice. The third and largest body of commentators has held that the entire Jerusalem church, including the apostles and the elders, chose Judas and Silas. Such authors included J. A. Alexander[113] (Presbyterian), J. M. Stifler[114](Baptist), J. Rawson Lumby[115] (Anglican), J. V. Bartlet[116] (Congregationalist), E. H. Plumptre[117] (Anglican), H. T. Andrews[118] (?), W. Graham Scroggie[119] (Baptist), R. C. H. Lenski[120] (Lutheran), Allan Menzies[121] (Presbyterian ?), G. H. C. Macgregor[122] (Presbyterian), T. C. Smith[123] (Baptist), H. Leo Eddleman[124] (Baptist), and Jerome Crowe[125] (Roman Catholic).

The heavy commentary support for the congregational selection of Judas

Barsabbas and Silas (15:22), which is coupled with the significant role of the apostles and the elders in the Jerusalem council, enables us to add this text to Acts 6:3 and Acts 13:2–3 so as to form a threefold list of pertinent texts in the Acts of the Apostles.

First Corinthians 5:2

Two passages in the Corinthian letters of Paul have a bearing upon church polity in the church at Corinth, although one would scarcely propose that polity procedures were a major concern for Paul as he wrote these letters. The texts are 1 Corinthians 5:2 and 2 Corinthians 2:6.

In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul was writing concerning an instance of incest in the Corinthian congregation, that is, a man's cohabiting with his father's wife (v. 1). Most commentators identify this woman as a stepmother. The Old Testament clearly prohibited such conduct (Lev. 18:8), but Paul declared that such wrongdoing transgressed the canons of pagan morality. A recent study has contended that Stoic conceptions such as the body being separated from ethics underlay the practice cited by Paul.[126] Only a few recent commentators have held that 1 Corinthians 5 and 2 Corinthians 2:5–11 refer to the same offender.[127]

Paul shamed the Corinthian congregation by asserting that grief or mourning leading to church discipline should have been the congregational response rather than the arrogance of permissive inaction (v. 2). The grief-driven result would have been: “A man who does a thing like that (*ho to ergon touto praksas*) ought to have been expelled (*arthe*) from the community (*ek mesou hymon*)” (JB). The NIV rendering is “put out of your fellowship,” and the NEB is “rooted out of your company.” It means total removal as the desired result. Verse 2 may reflect the Deuteronomic mandates for the punishment of adulterers[128] and other offenders,[129] may be based on Matthew 18:15–17,[130] and may be parallel to the discipline in the Qumran community.[131]

Joseph Agar Beet[132] noted more than a century ago that in 1 and 2 Corinthians Paul never referred to “elders or bishops,” even though they seemingly existed at the time, and consequently these are not mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5. Commentators have frequently interpreted the excommunication called for in verse 2b as the action of the Corinthian congregation: “the whole church,”[133]“the whole company of the Church,”[134] “the *whole* Christian group,”[135] “a full meeting of the local church,”[136] “the whole Church met in solemn conclave,”[137] “a solemn assembly,”[138] “a church meeting,”[139] “an

official church meeting,"[140] and "in democratic fashion."[141] According to Charles Hodge, the right of excommunication, according to this text,

> is…clearly recognized as belonging to the church. It is also clear…that this right belongs to each particular church or congregation. The power was vested in the church of Corinth, and not in some officer presiding over that church. The bishop or pastor was not reproved for neglect of discipline; but the church itself, in its organized capacity.[142]

John Calvin had held that 1 Corinthians 5:2 established "the power of excommunication,"[143] but Frédéric Louis Godet saw the texts not as referring to ecclesial excommunication but as indicating divinely imposed punishment.[144] According to H. L. Goudge, "Excommunication can only have its full effect, when it is felt to proceed from the outraged conscience of the Church."[145] J. W. MacGorman was quite specific:

> It was the responsibility of the entire congregation rather than that of the leadership only (v. 4). This was not the kind of problem that could be turned over to a committee for resolution. It was a *body* problem, not simply an arm or leg problem, and it required the participation of all members.[146]

Paul represented himself as spiritually present when the Corinthian church excommunicated the incestuous member (v. 3).[147] Thus "three basic conditions" were presented by Paul: the assembly of the church for action, the recognition of the presence of Paul's spirit, and excommunication with the power of Jesus Christ.[148] "There is a twofold reason for this excommunication: First, it is designed to save the soul of the offender and not simply to punish him or be rid of him. Second, it is meant to safeguard the purity and the statements of the Church."[149]

Second Corinthians 2:6

This verse is set in the context of Paul's writing about a man who was an offender in the Corinthian congregation. He admonishes the congregation: "The punishment (*he epitimia*) already imposed by the majority (*he hypo ton pleionon*) on the man in question (*to toiouto*) is enough (*hikanon*)" (NIV). Therefore, he needs now to receive forgiveness, comfort, and love (2:7–8).

George R. Beasley-Murray,[150] writing in 1971, and Sze-Kar Wan,[151] writing in 2000, have noted that pre-twentieth-century interpretation was

virtually unanimous in reckoning the incestuous man of 1 Corinthians 5 and the offender in 2 Corinthians 2:5–11 to be the same person. Such an interpretation would require that 1 Corinthians be the "letter of tears."[152] In rejecting such identification of the two persons, Beasley-Murray declared: "Let one compare the sense of moral shock with which Paul wrote 1 Corinthians 5 with the smoothing over of the offense in 2 Corinthians 2:5–11; 7:8–12, and one will surely be compelled to the view that the two situations are unrelated."[153]

This passage, according to Simon J. Kistemaker,[154] likely represents an application of Matthew 18:15–17. Some exegetes (Alfred Plummer,[155] R. C. H. Lenski,[156] Floyd V. Filson,[157] F. F. Bruce,[158] and V. George Shillington[159]) have insisted on translating *epitimia,* used only here in the New Testament, as "punishment" or "penalty," whereas others have rendered it as "reproof" (C. K. Barrett[160]), "censure" (Ralph P. Martin[161]), "rebuke or censure" (Ernest Best[162]), and "reproach or rebuke" (Roger L. Omanson and John Ellington[163]). According to certain interpreters (H. E. Dana,[164]Fred L. Fisher[165]), the offender in 2 Corinthians 2:5–11 was the leader of the anti-Paul party in the church at Corinth.

Two views seem to have prevailed among interpreters as to how to understand *ton pleionon,* often translated "the majority." Numerous, especially recent, exegetes[166] have understood this word to mean that there was a minority in the Corinthian church that opted or voted against the majority, probably by favoring a more severe or a less severe punishment for the offender. Alfred Plummer[167] and Floyd V. Filson[168] were certain that the minority was a pro-Pauline party seeking more severe punishment. Other exegetes, on the contrary, have taken *ton pleionon* as a collective term so as to mean "*the many,* the whole body,"[169] "the bulk of his fellows,"[170] "the *hoi polloi,*"[171] "the general body of members,"[172] or "*the main body* of the church."[173] Some commentators[174] have compared *ton pleionon* with the Qumran community's use of *he rabbîm,* "the many," or with the Old Testament usage in Daniel 9:27; 11:33, 39; 12:3, which are citing Isaiah 53:11.

In either case, whether "the majority" or the church body, congregational polity is represented by the text. For John Calvin,[175] the text calls for balance between "severity" and "moderation," and according to David E. Garland,[176] Paul was trying to avoid a "win-lose situation" and to reach a Christ wins-Satan loses situation.

The two texts just examined (1 Cor. 5:2 and 2 Cor. 2:6) do not prove that all

Christian churches of the apostolic era were governed or made decisions precisely as occurred in Corinth. It is, however, no unwarranted assumption to conclude that the Corinthian practice very likely prevailed throughout the Pauline churches.

Other Possible Texts and Other Considerations

In addition to the New Testament texts that have been examined in detail, there are other texts that have been cited by modern authors[177] in connection with or in support of Congregational polity. These include Acts 1:21–26, especially verse 23, the account of the selection of a successor to Judas Iscariot with two being nominated and lots being drawn for Matthias; Acts 9:26–28, the reception of Saul of Tarsus by the Jerusalem church; Galatians 6:1, the restoration by the "spiritual" of a member "trapped in some sin" (NIV); 1 Corinthians 16:3, the congregational selection of messengers to accompany Paul to Jerusalem; 2 Corinthians 8:22–24, Titus and others being called "messengers of the churches" (KJV, RSV) or "representatives of the churches" (NIV) or "delegates of the churches" (JB); Philippians 2:25, Epaphroditus being identified as "your messenger" (KJV, RSV, TEV, NIV) or "your representative" (NEB); 2 Thessalonians 3:6, a congregation being admonished by Paul to "keep away" (RSV, TEV, JB, NIV) from idlers or busybodies; Revelation 2:14–16, the church at Pergamum wrongly tolerating Balaamites and Nicolaitans; and Revelation 2:20–25, the church at Thyatira wrongly tolerating the person and the teaching of Jezebel, the self-acclaimed prophetess. These passages, although they may imply the exercise of Congregational polity, seem to be only indirect evidence of the same and hence need not be examined in detail.

Certain other considerations respecting the New Testament need to be noted. First, among the various usages or meanings in the New Testament of the Greek word for "church" (*ekklesia*) the overwhelmingly predominant usage is to refer to local churches, that is, 92 or 93 of the 114 occurrences. Baptist ecclesiologists, in particular, have focused attention on this predominant usage and have related it to congregational independence and congregational polity.[178]

Second, in the New Testament there is an absence of evidence of any territorial organization of the church or the churches. Indeed the Pauline usage of *ekklesia* in Ephesians and Colossians in reference to the whole company of all believers in Jesus Christ, both living and deceased, admits of no organizational expression, and "the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria" (Acts

9:31, RSV) was geographical, not organizational, in meaning.

Third, there has been a modern exegetical tradition that sees "bishops" and "elders" or "bishops," "elders," and "pastors" in New Testament usage as "identical and convertible terms"[179] and as referring to the same persons and not to different offices and officeholders. Such an understanding is based on the interchangeable usage of these titles in Acts 20:17, 28 ("elders," *presbyterous*; "shepherds," *poimainein*, TEV, NEB; "overseers," *episkopous*, KJV, RSV, JB, NIV) and on the sameness of the qualifications of a "bishop" (1 Tim. 3:1–7) and an "elder" (Titus 1:6–9).[180] It does not allow for a New Testament basis for a monarchical or diocesan bishop and can be harmonized with Congregational polity.

Fourth, there have been three basic responses to the question, "What is the relationship between the New Testament and Congregational polity?" These three were identified in the middle of the nineteenth century by Samuel Davidson.[181] First, there is the view that the New Testament provides no "system" or "pattern" of church government, and thus churches in later centuries should be guided by "expediency" in matters of polity, often conforming to the political order or the societal norms in relation to which particular churches exist. Second, others have held that the New Testament provides a single, "precise model," divinely given, of church polity which is applicable to "all ages and circumstances," which is to be rigidly enforced, and which leaves nothing to be determined in later centuries and in diverse cultures. Third, there has been a mediating position which finds in the New Testament "a pattern of ecclesiastical organization and discipline in *outline*, not in *detail*" according to which certain "principles" or essentials are clearly taught and their application is left "to the judgment of Christians" in diverse contexts with employment of a "wise expediency."[182] The present study is being undertaken in sympathy with this third answer.[183]

The History of Christianity

The Patristic and Medieval Ages

On the basis of the lack of credible evidence for such we assume that in the first century AD (or age of the primitive church) the Christian congregations, especially Gentile churches, were not linked organizationally with other congregations and were not governed by synods, councils, or hierarchs of any

kind.[184] There is evidence, such as by comparison of 1 Corinthians with the pastoral Epistles, that the leadership of these churches was shifting from charismatic or gifted leaders to fixed and functioning officeholders. The continuation of Congregational polity was subsequently threatened by the ascendancy of the Episcopate.

The first stage of Episcopal development was the monarchical episcopate, wherein a local church was led by a single bishop and by presbyters and deacons associated with him, as may be seen in the time of Ignatius of Antioch.[185] This pattern tended to prevail in city churches, and in churches formed by an apostle the bishop was increasingly regarded as the successor to the apostles and hence an authoritative teacher.[186] By the third century the bishop was nominated by presbyters, approved by neighboring bishops, and elected by the congregation. Presbyters, deacons, and lower clergy were selected by the bishop.[187] As country and village churches were dependent on larger city churches, the monarchical bishop extended his authority over a diocese so as to become a diocesan bishop.[188]

The Council of Nicaea (325) consisted solely of bishops, legislated for all the churches, saw the invasive participation of the emperor, and served to deemphasize the role of the congregation.[189] By the fourth century Congregational discipline had been supplanted by Episcopal discipline.[190] In the capital cities of the provinces of the Roman Empire the bishops took on the title of “metropolitan bishop” and extended their authority over churches of the province. In parallel fashion the bishops in the great cities of the empire (Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem), all of which, except Constantinople, had been founded by an apostle, assumed the title of “patriarchs” (that is, father-rulers).[191]

This patriarchal system would survive and become normative in the Greek East, whereas in the Latin West the church in Rome would, especially under the leadership of Bishop Leo I, assert the primacy or supremacy of its church and its bishop on the basis of Jesus' alleged bestowal upon Peter of a primacy over the other apostles.[192] By the sixth century, initially in France, the diocesan episcopate was modified by the introduction of the parish system, whereby the various city churches and the country churches had their own priests with local financial support but continued to be under the bishop's authority.[193] Pseudo-Dionysius introduced the Neo-Platonic concept of hierarchy (ruling priests).[194] Pope Gregory I, while continuing to expound the primacy and challenging the

claim by the patriarch of Constantinople to be “universal bishop,” called himself, as did his predecessors, “servant of the servants of God,” while extending his authority over churches.[195]

The medieval age was marked by the ascendancy of papal authority and power, first in Leo IX's eleventh-century expansion of the college of cardinals outside Rome, then in Gregory VII's assertion of the pope's universal sovereignty over civil rulers as well as church ministers, later in Innocent III's early thirteenth-century pinnacle in the exercise of papal power, and finally in Boniface VIII's late thirteenth-century claim that submission to the pope was essential to human salvation.[196] In the reform-oriented ecclesiologies of John Wycliffe and John Huss, the church was defined as the total body of elect persons under the headship of Christ rather than as the body of which the pope and his cardinals were the head.[197] But in none of the medieval reforming or dissenting parties or sects, from the Paulicians in the seventh century to the Bohemian Brethren in the fifteenth century, does one find the clear advocacy or practice of Congregational polity.[198]

The Protestant Reformation

But with Martin Luther came change, if only theoretically. In 1523 Luther issued a short treatise entitled *That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture*,[199] in which on the basis of the priesthood of all Christians he contended that the congregation, not the bishop, should call its preacher-teacher-pastor. Although Lutheran churches did not embrace the Congregational model, this treatise was an important step in its recovery. Throughout the magisterial expression of the Protestant Reformation, polity, although less vigorously controverted than the Lord's Supper, came to be diversely defended and practiced. Lutheranism had a connectional polity which in the Germanic lands was nonepiscopal but in the Scandinavian was episcopal. The Reformed churches became the exemplars of Presbyterial polity, whereas the Church of England retained Episcopal polity, though bereft of its papal modification. In all cases these churches were marked by state establishment.

In the radical wing of the Reformation, Anabaptists had at the center of their ecclesial restoration the concept of a gathered, non-state-established church composed solely of professing believers in Christ who had been baptized after profession of faith and who were living under spiritual discipline and as a suffering, missionary fellowship.[200] But Congregational polity, although it may

have been widely practiced among Anabaptists, was not a central or core Anabaptist value. Theologians such as Balthasar Hubmaier[201] and Peter Rideman[202] did not discuss it. Dietrich Philips did not list it as one of the seven "ordinances" of the true church or as one of the twelve "notes" of the church,[203] and the treatises of Menno Simons on church discipline and excommunication at best may imply Congregational polity.[204] As to its practice, the fifth of the seven Schleitheim Articles stated that a "shepherd" (pastor) is to be "supported…by the congregation which has chosen him."[205] One modern historian has asserted that Melchior Hofmann regarded the church "as a democratic organization in which all members have equal rights, [t]he clergy are shepherds and not lords," and "[e]very layman…has the full right to exercise his gifts,"[206] and Pilgram Marpeck's 1532 confession of faith declared: "No external power has the right to rule, benefit, nor govern in Christ's kingdom."[207]

Separatism and Independency

The writings of the leaders of English Separatist Puritanism, notably Robert Harrison, Robert Browne,[208] John Greenwood,[209]Harry Barrow,[210] Francis Johnson,[211] and Henry Ainsworth,[212] contain little explicit exposition or defense of Congregational polity. Browne did declare that the "Church planted or gathered, is a companie or number of Christians or beleevers, which by a willing covenant made with their God, are under the government of god and Christ, and kepe his lawes in one holie communion" and that the "Church government, is the Lordshipp of Christ in the communion of his offices."[213] Barrow's statement of the four causes of separation from the Church of England did include as the fourth "[t]he false and antichristian government wherwith ther churches ar ruled,"[214] and he did define a particular church as consisting of "a companie and fellowship of faithful and holie people gathered (togither) in the name of Christ Jesus…, worshipping him aright, being peaceabli and quietlie governed by his offices and lawes, keeping the unitie of faith in the bonde of peace and love unfained."[215]

Henry Ainsworth, in delineating the differences between Separatists and the establishment, noted that Christ had given to "every particular Church" "sufficient ordinary Officers" (that is, ministers), the enjoyment and practice of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, the power "to chuse and take unto themselves" persons adequate for the offices of "Pastors, Teachers, Elders, Deacons, and Helpers," and the support of these officers by "the free and

voluntarie contribution of the Church."[216]Ainsworth's hand may also be seen in the Separatists' True Confession of 1596, which not only reiterated congregational election and ordination of ministers (art. 23) and congregational discipline (arts. 24–25) but also declared (art. 38):

> That though Congregations bee thus distinct and severall bodyes, every one as a compact Citie in it self, yet are they all to walke by one and the same rule, and by all meanes convenient to have the counsell and help of one another in all needfull affayres of the Church, as members of one body in the common Faith, under Christ their head.[217]

In the transition from the earlier separatism to the later independency, John Robinson was significant for the principles of congregational governance. According to Timothy George, Robinson "stood, as it were, at the convergence of these two streams."[218] His *A Justification of Separation from the Church of England* (1610),[219] written in detail in reply to Richard Bernard, an Anglican, was "the most comprehensive exposition of the Separatist position issued in the seventeenth century."[220] Henry Jacob, who founded an independent (or Congregational) church in London in 1616, William Ames, and William Bradshaw espoused "the Independent or nonseparatist Congregational position," which lowered the anti-Anglican rhetoric and "worked toward a nationwide system of established Congregational churches." The Pilgrim Fathers, a minority from Robinson's congregation, planted Congregational polity in New England,[221] and the English Savoy Synod (1658) in its thirty-article statement on church order aptly summarized the basic features of congregational polity.[222]

Baptists

From their beginnings Baptists have espoused Congregational polity. This may be demonstrated both from their confessions of faith and from the writings of Baptist authors.

Congregational selection and dismissal of ministers, or officers, was affirmed in English Baptist confessions traceable to John Smith,[223] and in one related to Thomas Helwys one finds that every congregation is also said to have the Word of God and the obligation of discipline.[224] The First London Confession of Particular Baptists added emphases on congregational financial support of officers and the need for help and counsel among congregations.[225]Other confessions, although not all, framed during the 1650s specified some of these same features of Congregationalism,[226] and the same

was true of the Second London Confession (1677)[227] of Particular Baptists and the Orthodox Creed (1678) of General Baptists.[228]

Although one may be likely to surmise that in the context of American political democracy American Baptist confessions of faith would have been more explicit than the English in respect to Congregational polity, the opposite has actually been true. They have generally been less explicit,[229] perhaps because Congregationalism has been assumed. The most explicit American statements have been in the Doctrinal Statement of the American Baptist Association (1905), which specified the "equal authority and responsibility" of churches and the role of denominational bodies as being "the servants of the churches,"[230] the Articles of Faith of the Baptist Bible Union of America (1923), which affirmed the "self government" of the local church as superintended by Christ, its final authority in decision-making, and the cooperation of "true churches,"[231] and the Baptist Faith and Message Statement of the Southern Baptist Convention (1963), which defined a "New Testament church" as "an autonomous body, operating through democratic processes under the Lordship of Jesus Christ," in which "members are equally responsible."[232]

Most Baptist unions in continental Europe have affirmed Congregational polity in their confessions of faith. Most often these confessions specifically have affirmed the congregational selection of church officers. Some unions have adopted rather detailed statements on church order. The Evangelical Association of French-Speaking Baptist Churches adopted (1879; 1924) a threefold statement involving autonomy, church officers, and discipline.[233]The detailed statement written by Ivan Prokhanov and adopted by the Evangelical Christians in Russia differentiated "the universal church," "the local church," and "the family church,"[234] whereas Johann Kargel's confession (1913), used by the Russian Baptists, did not actually affirm Congregational polity.[235] The 1944 confession of German Baptists, jointly framed with the Open Brethren, did not affirm Congregational polity,[236] but the 1977 confession for all German-speaking Baptists in a detailed article on the church asserted that the priesthood of all believers is "the basic structure" of the church and that "pastoral care of the members is entrusted to the entire congregation."[237] The Romanian Baptist confession (1974) declared that "local church organization is based on the principle of autonomous democracy."[238] Briefer statements relative to Congregational polity have been adopted by Baptists in Sweden (1861),[239] Poland (1930),[240] Yugoslavia (1948),[241] Norway (1963),[242]and Hungary

(1967).[243] The statements relative to Congregational polity that may have been adopted by Baptist unions and conventions in Latin America, Asia, and Africa have not been assembled and hence are not available for study.

Treatises on ecclesiology by Baptist authors constitute a second major indicator of Baptist teaching and practice of Congregational polity. Edward Thurston Hiscox claimed divine authority and New Testament teaching for "independent" polity. Indeed, "each individual church is entirely independent, and governs itself, manages its own affairs, admits, disciplines, and dismisses its members, and transacts any and all other business necessary to be done, without the aid or interference of any other church or churches." Moreover, church government "is administered by the body of the members, where no one possesses a preeminence, but each enjoys an equality of rights."[244] According to John Leadley Dagg, the churches mentioned in the New Testament were both organized and independent. Today's "churches should choose, from among the ministers of the word, bishops or pastors to teach and rule them," "deacons should be chosen by the churches, from among their members, to minister in secular affairs," and both the admission and the excommunication of members are responsibilities of the local church.[245]

James Madison Pendleton taught three "truths" related to Congregational polity: (1) "the governmental power is in the hands of the people," for in the New Testament the churches admitted, excluded, and restored members; (2) "the right of a majority of the members of a church to rule [is] in accordance with the law of Christ"; and (3) "the power of a church cannot be transferred or alienated, and that church action is final."[246] For Hezekiah Harvey the view that the Scriptures are the only authority for church polity was being challenged by two contrary views: the authority of the patristic age and the argument from expediency.[247]

From his study of the New Testament, Edwin Charles Dargan concluded that "the local church of the New Testament appears as a self-governing unit, and yet as having important relations to its sister churches and imperative duties to mankind." "There is no trace whatever of any organization beyond the local church." Dargan interpreted Baptist history in the United States as indicating that "the almost uniform traditional practice of the Baptists" has been "the independency of the churches." He held that Baptists at the end of the nineteenth century in many respects adhered to the New Testament "model" but that their "divergencies" from that model were either "unavoidable" and "desirable" or "doubtful" and "harmful."[248]

William Roy McNutt[249] applied the concept of "soul competency," which had been enunciated by Edgar Young Mullins,[250] to church polity, joining it with "the free association of believers as a church," and asserted that "[d]emocracy and independency are the two chief planks in the platform of Baptist polity." Gaines Stanley Dobbins, who had introduced the concept of efficiency to Baptist polity,[251] rediscovered that the New Testament pattern involved the New Testament metaphors for the church and that changed and even disastrous concepts came during subsequent centuries.[252] But Alex Gilmore, writing from an English perspective, declared: "The Church is not, and must never be regarded as, a democracy, for the power is not in the hands of the *demos* but of the *Christos*: it is a Christocracy."[253] At the same time Norman H. Maring and Winthrop S. Hudson wrote:

> When Baptists…advocated a congregational form of church government, they did not do so because it offered a convenient administrative procedure by which decisions could be reached easily by a show of hands. They did so because they believed that Christ intended the full participation of the members of the church in its total life, as implied in the doctrine of the priesthood of believers. They also believed that, through such full participation, a church could be "a sensitive and delicate instrument" for searching out the will of God. It was not that they considered congregational decisions infallible in their dedications of God's intentions. They believed rather that the full participation of all would provide a check to the distortion occasioned by self-regard, human limitations of knowledge, and vested interests.[254]Lee H. McCoy clearly differentiated polity and government.
>
> Polity is the theory and form of the governmental system. It signifies the principles which operate when a church either governs itself or is governed by others.
>
> Polity and government are closely akin in meaning and are inseparably related. Polity denotes the seat of authority; government exercises the authority. Polity denotes the constitution or structure of government; government provides the structure. Polity denotes the method of government; government rules according to the method. Polity denotes the basis of membership; government regulates the membership. Polity denotes the way of doing; government sees that it is done. Polity denotes the type of government; government maintains the type of polity.

"Government in a church," furthermore, "enables members to do collectively what they could not do individually." For Baptists especially, it also "serves to enlarge the liberties and opportunities of each individual."[255]

In the writings of Austin Crouch[256] and especially of James L. Sullivan,[257] the focus in the discussion of polity shifted from the local church to the denomination. Allen Willis Graves identified six sources of authority for Baptist church polity: "the sovereignty of God," "the authority of Christ," "the authority of the Scriptures," "the competency of the individual," "confessions of faith," and "the authority of the congregation."[258] Not differentiating types of polity, Everett C. Goodwin has recently declared:

> Three kinds of order give shape to church life. The first is what the laws of society may expect of it. The second is what the covenants and traditions of the church may determine for it. And the third is what Christ calls it to be.[259]

Other Denominations Practicing Congregational Polity

On the basis of the eleventh edition of Frank S. Mead and Samuel S. Hill, *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*,[260] it would seem that apart from various Baptist denominational bodies, in the following Christian denominational bodies Congregational polity is being practiced in the United States:

Advent Christian Church
Church of God General Conference
Church of God (Anderson, Indiana)
Evangelical Free Church of America
Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches
Christadelphians
Christian Churches and Churches of Christ
Christian Congregation, Inc.
Congregational Christian Churches (National Association)
Conservative Congregational Christian Conference
American Evangelical Christian Churches
Bible Presbyterian Church
Christian and Missionary Alliance
Christian Brethren (Plymouth Brethren)
Grace Gospel Fellowship

Independent Fundamentalist Churches of America
Apostolic Christian Church of America
Church of God (Holiness)
Association of Free Lutheran Congregations
Church of the Lutheran Brethren of America
Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Conservative Mennonite Conference
General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches
Evangelical Methodist Church
Christian Church of North America, General Council
Congregational Holiness Church
Elim Fellowship
Full Gospel Fellowship of Churches and Ministers, International
Independent Assemblies of God, International
Open Bible Standard Churches, Inc.
United Pentecostal Church, International
Schwenckfelder Church
General Convention of the New Jerusalem in the U. S. A.

Congregational Polity and Theology

If there is evidence that congregational polity was exercised in the apostolic or New Testament era and if Congregational polity came to be part of the heritage of the more radical or thoroughgoing facets of the Protestant Reformation, one should then ask to what extent and how this mode of church governance is related to the doctrine of the church and to other Christian doctrines.

Congregational Polity and the Definition of a Baptist Church

Many and somewhat varied have been the definitions framed and set forth for the nature of the church according to Baptists. Of these we now make reference to a representative number of such definitions. Edward T. Hiscox's 1860 definition is as follows:

> A Christian Church is *a congregation of baptized believers in Christ*, worshipping together; associated in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel; practising its precepts observing its ordinances; recognizing and receiving Christ as their supreme lawgiver and ruler; and taking his Word as their sufficient and exclusive rule of faith and practice, in all matters of

religion.[261]

In his 1890 revision Hiscox wrote:

> A Christian church…is a company of persons divinely called and separated from the world, baptized on a profession of their faith in Christ, united in covenant for worship and Christian service, under the supreme authority of Christ, whose word is their only law and rule of life in all matters of religious faith and practice.[262] J. M. Pendleton in 1867 offered as definition:
>
> > A church is a congregation of Christ's baptized disciples, acknowledging him as their Head, relying on his atoning sacrifice for justification before God, and depending on the Holy Spirit for sanctification, united in the belief of the gospel, agreeing to maintain its ordinances and obey its precepts, meeting together for worship, and cooperating for the extension of Christ's kingdom in the world.[263]

James Robinson Graves, the leading Landmarker, in 1880 set forth seven marks of the true church, which he affirmed to be found among Baptists:

> 1. "The Church and Kingdom of Christ is a Divine Institution."
>
> 2. The Church "is a Visible Institution."
>
> 3. The Church's "Locality is upon this Earth."
>
> 4. The Church is "a Single Congregation," "independent of all other bodies."
>
> 5. The Church has a "professedly regenerate" membership.
>
> 6. The Church practices "Christian immersion" as "the act appointed for the profession of gospel faith."
>
> 7. The Church observes the Lord's Supper as a "commemorative" "local church ordinance."[264]

George W. McDaniel in 1919 identified as one of three distinctive doctrines of Baptists: "We believe that a church is a body of baptized believers, equal in rank and privilege, administering its own affairs under the headship of Jesus Christ."[265] The Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland in 1926 adopted a definition which after initially identifying the universal church proceeded to define a particular church as follows:

> We believe that this holy society is truly to be found wherever

> companies of believers unite as Churches on the ground of a confession of personal faith. Every local community thus constituted is regarded by us as both enabled and responsible for self-government through His indwelling Spirit who supplies wisdom, love, and power, and who…leads these communities to associate freely in wider organisations for fellowship and the propagation of the Gospel.[266]

In 1935 William Roy McNutt presented his definition of a Baptist church:

> A church is an organized group of the baptized disciples of Christ, regenerate by and through him, made priests unto God by his appointment, recognizing him alone as Head, and purposing to keep their hearts warm in allegiance to him, their Lord, to culture their souls in his graces, and to spread the good news about him through all the earth.[267]

For Harvey Eugene Dana in 1941, “a church is a local body of believers, baptized upon profession of faith in Christ, voluntarily banded together for the promotion of Christ's redemptive purposes for mankind.”[268] Everett C. Goodwin, in revising Hiscox, wrote in 1995:

> For Baptists, a church is a community of persons who have individually experienced the regenerating grace of God; have been baptized on profession of faith in Christ; have united with others of like mind and spirit in covenant for worship, instruction, and the observance of Christian ordinances, as well as for witness, mission, and service as they understand the gospel to require; have accepted Christ as their supreme Lord and Guide; and accept the Bible, especially the New Testament, as a divinely inspired record and therefore a trustworthy, authoritative, and sufficient rule of faith and practice.[269]

Of the nine definitions quoted, only two, the British statement and that of McDaniel, clearly allude to Congregational polity, though Graves's marks include the independence of the congregation. References to the church's covenanting in Hiscox and Goodwin may imply Congregational polity. But all the statements were framed, it seems, by practitioners of Congregational polity. Baptist understandings of the church from the early seventeenth century to the dawn of the twenty-first have been intimately interwoven with congregational principles. Although Congregational polity among Baptists has developed diverse internal or structural patterns, to be Baptist has been to affirm and practice Congregational polity.

Congregational Polity and the Priesthood of All Christians

Specifically taught in three or four New Testament texts (1 Pet. 2:4–10; Rev. 1:5b–6; 5:9–10; 20:6)[270] and closely connected with the offering of "spiritual sacrifices" (1 Pet. 2:5), the priesthood of all Christians was affirmed in the early patristic age, overcome and supplanted for centuries by the clerical priesthood, and rediscovered by Martin Luther. Protestant denominations applied this concept in various ways, and such diversity has also characterized its advocacy among Baptists.[271] Among Southern Baptists during the twentieth century there was a prevailing tendency to affirm the direct, unhindered access of believers to God through Christ as the central meaning of the universal priesthood, but more recently there has been a trend to affirm the collective offering of spiritual sacrifices as that central meaning.[272] The latter view places responsibility above privilege and servanthood above access.

It is not difficult to perceive that there is an important connection between the priesthood of all Christians and Congregational polity, especially when the latter is understood as the Congregational governance by all the believers. Likewise, it is possible to see a connection between the denials of the priesthood of all Christians in favor of the clerical priesthood or pastoral authoritarianism and the denial of Congregational polity by adopting another form of polity. If all the believers are to exercise the "royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9) through the offering of various spiritual sacrifices, then why should not those same believers together participate in and be responsible for the decision-making of the congregation?

Congregational Polity and Spiritual Gifts

The seventeenth-century English Baptist confessions of faith were prone to declare that ordained ministers should indeed have gifts such as preaching and teaching to be qualified for their ministries but said almost nothing about other gifts of the Holy Spirit.[273]After centuries of neglect, latter-twentieth-century Baptists authors, under the impact and influence of Pentecostalism, began to give attention to spiritual gifts as contemporary reality.[274]Baptists have not been united on the question as to whether the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit ceased to be given at the end of the apostolic era or have continued to be given even to the present.[275]But increasingly Baptists have affirmed that to every Christian is given at least one spiritual gift and that he or she is obligated to exercise such for the common good.[276] Should not those who exercise the gifts of helping (1 Cor. 12:28), encouragement (Acts 4:36), hospitality (Rom. 12:13), and administration

(1 Cor. 12:28) or the gifts of wisdom, knowledge (1 Cor. 12:8), and distinguishing between spirits (1 Cor. 12:10) as well as those who exercise the gifts of shepherding and teaching (Eph. 4:11) participate in the decision-making of the congregation?

Congregational Polity and Christian Growth Toward Maturity

The New Testament epistles contain clear mandates for Christians to grow or increase toward maturity. Paul thanked God because the faith of the Thessalonian believers was "growing abundantly" (*hyperauksanei*) (RSV) or increasing "mightily" (2 Thess. 1:3 NEB). The gifted leaders were given "to prepare the Lord's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature (*andra teleion*)." Being no longer infants blown about by the wind and waves of error, believers, "speaking the truth in love," are to "grow up (auksesomen) into…Christ" (Eph. 4:11–15 NIV). According to Peter, "like newborn babies," believers are to "crave pure spiritual milk" (NIV) so as thereby "to grow up to salvation" (1 Pet. 2:2 RSV). Peter's farewell admonition was to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 3:18 RSV, TEV, NIV). But failure to grow from a milk diet to solid food, the food for maturity, evoked rebuke (Heb. 4:11–14).

Churches devoted to the spiritual growth of their members should provide for them every available incentive for growth amid a secular and sometimes hostile society. Part of the maturing process can be participation in the decision-making of the congregation. By serving on committees, work groups, or ministry teams as well as by sharing in congregational meetings, wherein all members are seeking the mind and will of Christ, believers can grow in faith and understanding and in love and fellowship. By such growth they also identify more fully with the message, the ministry, and the mission of the congregation itself.

Congregational Polity and the Witness of All Christians

Jesus in his high priestly prayer asked that through the unity of his disciples, modeled on the unity of the Father and of the Son, "the world may believe" that the Father has sent Jesus (John 17:21, 23). In his Great Commission as given to the Eleven, Jesus commanded that they "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19 RSV, JB, NIV). Similarly, to the church gathered in Jerusalem he commanded that, after the coming of the Holy Spirit, these believers should be his "witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and

to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8 RSV). Furthermore, according to Peter, those who are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" are indeed to "declare the wonderful deeds of him who called" them "out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

Johann Gerhard Oncken, the pioneer of the Baptist movement in Germany, made normative the motto, "Every Baptist a missionary,"[277] H. Wheeler Robinson, the English Baptist Old Testament scholar, spoke of "the prophethood of all believers,"[278] and Franklin M. Segler, Southern Baptist pastoral theologian, declared, "Lay-witnessing is not a specialized activity but the normal expression of redeemed persons."[279] Among Southern Baptists in the latter half of the twentieth century the training of church members for personal evangelism was greatly emphasized.[280] Reflecting upon Southern Baptists during the latter half of the twentieth century, Fisher H. Humphreys has asserted that the most important change has been "the sweeping introduction of short-term missions [defined as from a "few days to a few years by volunteers"] into Baptist life." This, according to Humphreys, has been "a moving of the Spirit of God."[281]

If, therefore, increasingly members of Baptist churches are engaged in their communities in Christian witness to unbelievers and are going overseas for short-term mission tasks with groups of fellow Christians and returning with new zeal for and commitment to global evangelization, is it tenable to hold that they should be deprived of meaningful participation in the decision-making of their local churches while a domineering pastor or power-hungry deacons or ruling elders or an oligarchical few preempt that decision-making?

Congregational Polity, Pastoral Leadership, and Deacon Servanthood

Mistaken indeed is the notion that the practice of Congregational polity jeopardizes or cripples the legitimate roles of the ordained ministers in the congregation. There is no either/or choice between such polity and such ordained ministry. The earliest Baptist and Congregational documents affirmed the essential roles of ordained ministers as well as congregational polity.[282] The Great Awakening bequeathed to Baptists in the United States a strong conviction as to the indispensability of a divinely called and gifted pastoral ministry.[283] Baptist congregations have every reason to expect of their pastors that they not only engage in preaching, pastoral care and nurture, and church administration but also lead by both precept and by example. But this leadership is more than the mere exercise of office. "Pastoral authority," declared Segler, "is more an authority of influence than an authority of office." It "grows out of the pastor's

character and spiritual development and is so recognized by the church."[284] Longer tenure in a given pastorate can be a major factor in pastoral leadership, for he who has baptized and instructed the newly converted, married the young, visited the sick, counseled the troubled, and buried the dead is more likely to influence the direction of a church's ministry. The same can be true of associate pastors and ministers of education, music, missions, and the like.

Deacons have played a significant role in Baptist churches since the early seventeenth century. Charleston, South Carolina, Baptists in the eighteenth century reckoned that deacons were responsible for three tables: the Lord's Supper, the table of the poor, and the table of the pastor (pastoral support).[285] For more than a century (c. 1846–c. 1968) among Southern Baptists it was common to define the work of deacons as pertaining to "temporalities" (offerings, buildings, etc.) and not to spiritual affairs.[286] This trend was redirected during the latter third of the twentieth century with the ministry of deacons redefined more in terms of sharing with the pastor the primary spiritual concerns of the church.[287]When the deacon body was being conceived, after the analogy of business corporations such as banks, as a "board of directors," there was clearly violation of or deviation from Congregational polity. But, rightly interpreted in terms of its servant (*diakonos*) etymology and origin, the deaconship is a firm ally of Congregational polity.

Congregational Polity and Church Discipline

The early English Baptists interpreted the exercise of discipline as a function of the congregation.[288] The Charleston Baptists practiced three levels of congregational censure: rebuke, suspension, and excommunication.[289] Nineteenth-century Baptists continued to practice congregational discipline,[290] but its exercise lapsed with the advent of the twentieth century. To the extent that it is practiced today, it should be the responsibility of the congregation. Wayne Grudem, a Baptist theologian who favors governance of the congregation by "plural local elders," concedes that, because of its biblical mandate (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:4), discipline must not be exercised by the elders.[291] If, then, members are both received into and excluded from a Baptist church by decision of the congregation, one may say that church membership is an extension of Congregational governance.

Congregational Polity and the Kingdom of God

Early Particular Baptist confessions of faith tended to equate the kingdom

of God in its present sense with the church as “a company of visible saints” or the true church,[292] eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Baptists tended to neglect the doctrine of the kingdom of God,[293] and twentieth-century Baptists rediscovered the latter doctrine.[294] George Eldon Ladd addressed the question of the relation of the church or churches to the kingdom of God by a fourfold answer: the church is created by the kingdom, “witnesses to the kingdom,” “is the instrument of the kingdom,” and is “the custodian of the kingdom.”[295]

Baptists at the dawn of the twenty-first century are better able than some of their predecessors to grasp the global dimensions of the kingdom of God in relation to the fulfillment of the Great Commission. They live in an age of instant communication and rapid transportation; many have experienced intercontinental travel. Theirs is not an enclave of isolated provincialism. But they also are becoming aware of the costliness and the dangers for witnesses to the gospel because of the fierceness of resistance to the gospel. Baptist laypersons from the various professions, businesses, and trades and of various ages and both sexes must have a voice in the decision-making and mission-projection of their Baptist congregations. The churches need their wisdom and experience, and they need the participation. Anything less would be a tragic betrayal of the Baptist heritage at a crucial moment in Christian history.

In summary, Congregational polity is consistent with and closely related to Baptist definitions of a church, the priesthood of all Christians, the exercise of spiritual gifts, Christian growth, the witness of all Christians, the ministries of pastors and of deacons, church discipline, and the kingdom of God.

Congregational Polity and Praxis

The decision to adopt Congregational polity and the process of implementing Congregational polity, in light of the foregoing evidence, must be enacted in a context in which alternative polities are making their appeal and the benefits of Congregationalism must be set forth convincingly.

The Contemporary Crisis

Among Southern Baptist churches today there is evidence of major erosion or overt rejection of Congregational polity in actual practice. At least three factors can be identified as contributing to such erosion or rejection.

First, most megachurches,[296] which have proliferated during the last quarter

of a century, seem to have adopted a polity which is either an attenuation or a displacement of Congregational polity. Lacking a thorough study of megachurch polity in general, we turn to a specific study of First Southern Baptist Church, Del City, Oklahoma, made by Wilson Hull Beardsley,[297] who offers generalizations about megachurches. Accordingly, the "megachurch is heavily pastor centered." The selection and the termination of the employed church staff is "at the direction of the pastor and in consultation with the personnel committee." The pastor is expected to speak first in most church meetings, the role of deacons is altered, and the pastor and staff become "less accountable to the congregation for the details and plans of the ministries." Pastoral authority tends to grow with the length of a pastor's tenure in a particular congregation, and members of megachurches tend to be "more willing to be observers than… participants." But Beardsley noted that the megachurch pastor "is not a dictatorial authority figure," his authority being "that of leadership."[298]

Writers on church growth and megachurches have given little attention to the question of polity. One of the leading authorities, John N. Vaughan, assumes that megachurches inevitably change in polity as they increase in membership: "As a church grows beyond being a single-cell organism and as organizational change occurs, an increasing shift in congregational polity evolves from congregational (people led), to presbyterial (deacon/staff led), to episcopal (staff/deacon led or staff led)." Without textual or exegetical evidence Vaughan concludes: "This shift is seen in the Book of Acts and occurs in the dynamic of changing group size."[299] Those who aspire to build megachurches seem to see Congregational polity as an impediment.[300] Even Os Guinness's searing critique of megachurches, based on the presupposition that "the empire of modernity is the great alternative to the kingdom of God," and concluding that megachurches have compromised with and capitulated to modernity, includes no attention to polity.[301] No one seems to be asking whether a megachurch can practice any form of Congregational polity.

Second, some Baptist pastors have been influenced by non-Baptist advocates and practitioners of elder rule to adopt some form of rule by elders in their Baptist congregations. These elders are to be differentiated from preaching and teaching elders. John F. MacArthur, Jr., pastor of Grace Community Church, Panorama City, California, through his writings and seminars has had considerable influence, especially on younger Baptist pastors who are recent seminary graduates. MacArthur has deplored the church's failure to equip its members for ministry and thus the prevalence of "professional 'pulpitism,'

financed by lay spectators”[302] and does recognize that church discipline is a congregational function.[303]But the Grace Church, believing that Christ “rules through a plurality of godly men, or elders,” has about fifty such elders, whose task is “to discern the mind of God prayerfully, thoughtfully, and patiently” on those issues on which “the Scripture is silent” and whose decisions must be “unanimous.”[304] This pattern, although not placed in a complete Presbyterian system, has been called “semi-Presbyterianism.”[305] Korean-American Baptist churches have special difficulty in attaining Congregational polity because first-generation immigrants have had little experience with political democracy and because many members are ex-Presbyterians.[306]

Another influence toward elder rule in Southern Baptist churches has been the calling of pastors who have been trained at Dallas Theological Seminary. Although its doctrinal statement does not mention elders, Dallas Seminary's instruction seems to assume the presence of elders in churches to be served by its graduates, especially Bible churches. The current catalog, in describing the women's ministry track on the Th. M. degree, declares that “Dallas Seminary holds the position that Scripture limits to men the role of elder and senior pastor.”[307] More than a century ago a Baptist ecclesiologist contended that “there is no scriptural warrant for” “a ruling eldership” “distinct from a preaching eldership.”[308] The burden of proof still rests on its proponents.

Third, Congregational polity has been rejected or subjected to critical review in Southern Baptist churches on the basis that it is cumbersome, time-consuming, and detracting from the church's central mission. It must be acknowledged that, even as in the political sphere democracy is not always the most efficient mode of government, for dictatorships and oligarchies can claim greater efficiency, so in the ecclesial sphere Congregationalism is not always the most efficient mode of polity, especially if efficiency be measured in terms of the time for and the ease of decision-making. The appeal to allow a small group in the congregation to make the decisions for the congregation parallels the appeal to the citizen to give up voting and participatory democracy and to put governing into the hands of the experts.[309] Moreover, decision-making as to the life, ministry, and mission of a church should not be rigidly separated from the execution or living out of the church's life, ministry, and mission. Members who are involved in one should also be involved in the other, lest there be an unhealthy hiatus.

Advantages of Congregational Polity

We have examined in detail six passages in the New Testament and concluded that they are strongly suggestive of Congregational polity. We have traced the lapse of such polity in the patristic era, its recovery in the English Reformation among Separatists, Baptists, and Independents, and its adoption by other Christian denominations in the United States. We have explored the interfacing of Congregational polity with several theological concerns. We have probed some causes of the contemporary crisis among Southern Baptists vis-à-vis Congregational polity. Now it remains only to ask whether there are indeed advantages to Congregational polity.

First, Congregational polity is fair to the members of the congregation. Prior to Vatican Council II (1962–1965) it was commonly said that the Roman Catholic laity's relationship with the clergy was threefold: “pay, pray [for], and obey.” Those who through their voluntary stewardship of material gifts, their life of prayer, and their deeds of ministering service sustain the work of the congregation should indeed have some role in the decision-making process of the congregation. Not all believers are equally gifted, but each should have a voice or expression of will amid the gathered and covenanted community of faith.[310]

Second, Congregational polity can be exercised under various patterns or structures as suggested above[311] and hence is not a case of monolithic singularity. In all of these patterns there should be a significant place for pastoral leadership. If indeed, as we often hear today, the pastor ought “to cast a vision” for the congregation, that vision must be shared and adopted by the congregation if its implementation is to be effective and lasting. Books on leadership by Baptist authors only rarely address the relationship between pastoral leadership and Congregational polity.[312] Likewise, in all these patterns the sharing of the church's ministry is essential. “The ideal for pastor and layman,” Franklin Segler declared, “is that they are co-workers in the church's ministry…, brethren together in life's higher calling, that of bringing the church and the world together in Christ.”[313]

Third, Congregational polity is more capable than other polities of developing loyalty to and support of the congregation. Laypeople living under other polities often fret and complain about not being able to participate in decision-making, and laypeople living under Congregational polity may question it after being in the minority in a major congregational decision. But

Congregational polity can produce loyal and responsible churchmanship.[314]Participating in decision-making helps Christians to be able to say meaningfully, "*our* church."

Fourth, Congregational polity is very likely to produce stronger, more mature Christians than other polities. It is difficult to explain the blossoming of the laity in Southern Baptist churches during the twentieth century—from Annie Armstrong to Bill Wallace to Owen Cooper to Jimmy Carter—apart from some attribution to Congregational polity.[315] If the twenty-first century is to see the global expansion of a vigorous Baptist laity, it is difficult to envision such without Congregational polity.

Congregational polity as exercised is not a perfect polity even as the congregation's members are not perfect saints. More than forty years ago Segler lamented that "in actual practice churches of congregational polity do not always follow democratic principles" and hence Congregational polity theoretically affirmed does not always eventuate in the practice of Congregational polity.[316]

Finally, Congregational polity is not an end in itself but rather a means to other ends. Like other polities, it must be ultimately tested by its capacity and performance in discerning and fostering obedience to the will of the triune God —Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—for the church and for the kingdom of God. Such Congregationalism—what James L. Sullivan has called "theodemocracy"—should be a means toward the "growth and maturity of Christians unto Christlikeness, the proclamation of the gospel to all nations and peoples, and the coming of the kingdom of God 'on earth as it is in heaven'" (Matt. 6:10c RSV, TEV, NIV).[317]

James Leo Garrett, Jr., is greatly indebted to Dongsun Cho and Kyung Cho for their careful typing of this detailed chapter, together with assistance in completion from Trudy (Mrs. Charles E.) Penton, and to Drs. Robert J. Beck, C. W. Brister, and Malcolm B. Yarnell III for reading and making valuable suggestions for this chapter.

Responses to James Leo Garrett, Jr., on Congregational Polity

Response by Daniel L. Akin

I wish to begin my response to Dr. Garrett with a word of personal tribute,

if I might. I was a student at Southwestern Seminary, and I have served as the dean at Southern Seminary, institutions in which James Leo Garrett faithfully served for many years. To my loss, I was unable to have him as either a professor or a colleague. In God's providence things did not come together for this to happen. However, I still consider myself a student of this fine Christian scholar and gentleman through his writings. Many of us, especially Southern Baptists, have been well instructed by Dr. Garrett, and we have been challenged to aspire to a high level of scholarship by his example. For many hundreds of Southern Baptist ministers, I want to say thank you to Dr. James Leo Garrett. We are your debtors many times over.

Dr. Garrett's chapter is classic James Leo. The analysis is encyclopedic, and the bibliography above justifies the value of the chapter. Added to this is a compelling defense of Congregationalism, as well as a superb recounting of church and Baptist history in the context of our assignment. Let me move to cite particular strengths of his treatment.

First, Dr. Garrett acknowledges that Congregationalism is not incompatible with certain tasks, and issues being delegated to individual members or groups of members. It does seem to me he give us this truth on one hand and takes it back later, especially in his critique of the megachurch, the very place where such a pattern makes the most sense.

Second, Dr. Garrett notes that Congregational polity can be practiced according to different patterns.

Third, Dr. Garrett wisely grounds much of his argument in church discipline, the very place where Congregationalism is most evident in the New Testament (as an aside, just how many commentaries does he have on Matthew, or Acts for that matter!)

Fourth, his survey of the Acts material reveals the significant involvement of the congregation in matters of doctrine, missions, and ministry.

Fifth, his reminder that “elders or bishops” are never mentioned in 1 and 2 Corinthians even though they “seemingly existed at the time,” is telling for the entire congregation's involvement in maintaining doctrinal and moral purity.

Sixth, Dr. Garrett rightly notes that Acts 9:31 is an expression of the church's geography and not its organization, an evidence for local church autonomy.

Seventh, Dr. Garrett correctly notes the implications of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers for Congregationalism. He is also right on target in

locating this doctrine's essence, “in responsibility above privilege and servanthood above access.” Too many Baptists have failed to see the truth of this observation.

Eighth, Dr. Garrett is right that congregations have every right to expect their pastors to lead by both precept and example. However, congregations must also let their pastors lead.

Ninth, Dr. Garrett accurately points out that the most recent concept of deacon in Baptist life, “being conceived, after the analogy of business corporations such as banks, as a ‘board of directors’…was clearly a violation of or deviation from Congregational polity.” It is also clearly a violation and deviation from Scripture, a deviation that has brought great hurt to the body of Christ.

As to the points of weakness in this chapter, let me begin with what is the most serious. There is no mention, much less interaction, with the crucial text on pastoral leadership such as 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13; Hebrews 13:7, 17. These texts must be held in balance with those which affirm Congregationalism, or Congregationalism will run amuck with disastrous consequences as the result.

Another difficulty with Dr. Garrett's argument is that he incorrectly identifies John MacArthur as a Presbyterian (note 99). Grace Community Church is an independent evangelical congregation that practices believer's baptism by immersion. It does have a plurality of elders with significant authority, but there are also Congregational aspects to its governmental structure as well; for example, annual affirmation of the leadership and the calling of the pastor-teacher.

Third, it would have been helpful to address the theological error of equating “soul competency” with the “priesthood of all believers.” Soul competency rightly belongs to all people as image bearers of God. The priesthood of all believers is, as it states, a doctrine only for believers.

Another difficulty is that in his survey of Baptist history Dr. Garrett notes that Alex Gilmore believed the church to be, not a democracy, but a Christocracy. This is the biblical perspective and it would have been good for Dr. Garrett clearly to affirm this.

Fifth, Dr. Garrett seems to connect the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers with the unilateral (?) decision-making process of the congregation. Such a view fails to take into consideration the spiritual maturity of congregates, for example new Christians. Should a babe in Christ have an equal voice and

vote as, say, the pastor? This seems foreign to the spirit of the New Testament and reads more into the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers than is justified. That “part of the maturing process can be participation in the decision-making of the congregation” is true. However, an “equal voice” to the spiritual leadership of the church “across the board” is both unscriptural and unwise. Perhaps I overstate what Dr. Garrett has in mind (and perhaps not), but a warning needs to be sounded just the same. It is at this very point that Congregationalism has been abused and rightly criticized.

Another difficulty can be found when Dr. Garrett says, “Mistaken indeed is the notion that the practice of Congregational polity jeopardizes or cripples the legitimate roles of the ordained ministers in the congregation.” I was stunned by the statement, and I had to wonder, for a moment, what Baptist churches had Dr. Garrett not visited or heard about? Repeated horror story after horror story from fellow ministers and students are far too numerous to sustain Dr. Garrett's confident assertion. The practice of a biblical Congregationalism that affirms and follows strong pastoral leadership is the biblical and essential pattern. Then, Dr. Garrett seems to affirm Segler's judgment that “pastoral authority is more an authority of influence than an authority of office.” The fact is that it is both, as 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and 1 Peter 5:1–4 clearly teach.

As an eighth difficulty, Dr. Garrett's criticism of the megachurches, though needful and legitimate to a point (e.g., little or no accountability of some senior pastors to anyone), is out of balance. To argue that they, in function, appear almost Episcopal, claims more than is warranted. Further, his statement that “no one seems to be asking whether a megachurch can practice any form of Congregational polity” is simply hyperbole. Pointing out weaknesses and potential dangers of these churches is fine and appropriate. Making such a blanket statement with no supporting evidence at all is irresponsible.

Then, Dr. Garrett's criticism of Dallas Theological Seminary and its influence on Southern Baptists, while not surprising, is disappointing. When I was a student at Southwestern, Dallas Seminary was a favorite “whipping boy,” though what was often attacked were false caricatures of what Dallas Seminary actually taught. I consider, and always have, Dallas Seminary an ally in building the kingdom of God. I still do.

Finally, Dr. Garrett says, “Congregational polity is fair to the members of the congregation.” To this I have a question—is it our goal to be fair or biblical?

In sum, Dr. Garrett does an excellent job of defending Congregational polity. The weakness of his chapter is in not defending pastoral leadership

adequately. The New Testament supports both, and so should we.

Response by Robert L. Reymond

Unlike the other two Congregationalists in this forum who attempt to make the case for a particular kind of Congregational polity, James Leo Garrett's impressive essay defends Congregational polity *per se* as "that form of church governance in which final human authority rests with the local or particular congregation when it gathers for decision-making"—decision-making about "membership, leadership, doctrine, worship, conduct, missions, finances, property, relationships, and the like." He espouses this polity, he states, not because the New Testament provides a "single, 'precise model,' divinely given, of church polity which is applicable to 'all ages and circumstances,' which is to be rigidly enforced, and which leaves nothing to be determined in later centuries and in diverse cultures," but because the New Testament provides a "pattern of ecclesiastical organization and discipline in *outline,* not in *detail,* according to which certain 'principles' or essentials are clearly taught and their application is left 'to the judgment of Christians' in diverse contexts with employment of a 'wise expediency.'"

It is apparent from his expositions of his six primary texts—Matthew 18:15–20; Acts 6:3; 13:2–3; 15:22; 1 Corinthians 5:2; and 2 Corinthians 2:6—that for him the main "principle" that the New Testament teaches respecting polity is that *every* member of *every* local congregation votes on *all* matters that come before the congregation, such as those listed above. My reading of these passages does not lead me to the same conclusion so some comment is in order about each of his selected texts.

Regarding the meaning of the word *church* in Matthew 18:17, I agree that in this context it refers to a local group of Christians. But this does not carry us very far. We now have to think about the size of this "church." Is it only a "house church" comprising fifteen or twenty people? Or is it a much larger assembly with a hundred or so people? Or perhaps one even larger than that? And does it have elders who oversee the congregation, as it should? If you want to conjure up a scary scenario, just contemplate a large local church today of some thousand or more members in which all of its members are involved in adjudicating, as required by Congregationalist standards, an alleged moral transgression on the part of one or two of its members. If that church survives in one piece without lasting hard feelings between members, it will be a miracle.

But are we forced by this text to such a scenario? I do not think so. I would

urge that it does not follow by logical necessity that Jesus intended that *every* member of the local church is to be informed of an erring brother's offense and that every member must be involved in the adjudication of the case. Living as he did within the Jewish culture where such matters were handled by the elders of the city or the elders of the synagogue, he could have intended, and probably did intend, that the erring brother's offence should be taken to the church in the sense that it was taken to the elders of the church for their adjudication.

This is the understanding of the *Book of Church Order* of my denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (27–5: "If rejection persists, then the Church must act through her court unto admonition, suspension, excommunication and deposition." It should be noted that verses 18 and 19 (note the combination of "heaven" and "earth" in both verses), that are very likely to be understood from the context as further commentary on the adjudication of the offense, suggest just such an involvement of a limited number of judges ("two [vs. 20: "or three"] of you"). Of course, Congregationalists state that the congregation can erect a commission to deal with such, but when a Congregational church allows a select group of people to act in its stead, is it really any longer acting as a Congregational church? Has it not abandoned its principle, "every member a voter on all matters," in favor of the clearly taught representative republicanism of New Testament Presbyterianism?

The *undeniable* twin facts of (1) the presence of the two pericopes in the Pastoral Letters spelling out in great detail the qualifications of elders (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9) who are to "care for God's church" (1 Tim. 3:5) and who are to keep watch over their church members as men who will have to give an account to God (Heb. 13:17), and (2) the presence of a *plurality* of elders in *every* church in the New Testament (Acts 14:23; see Titus 1:6) should force the advocates of Congregationalism to face the following question squarely: *In the name of these obvious truths, what are these elders for if the King and Head of the church does not intend for them to govern the congregations over which he has placed them?* I am not convinced that Congregationalists have ever really squarely addressed this question.

With regard to Garrett's conclusion that the entire congregation elected the deacons in Acts 6:3, I have no objection since this comports with Presbyterian practice as well. But it must also be noted that, while the congregation elected them, it was the apostles acting as church elders who laid their hands on them, thereby ordaining them to the diaconal office (Acts 6:6). I do not believe that the New Testament requires that every church member must lay hands on a man being ordained to the diaconal ministry.

With regard to Acts 13:2–3, in my essay I contended that it was the Antioch presbytery that “set apart” Barnabas and Paul for the Gentile mission by a commissioning service that included the laying on of hands. Surely this is more likely what occurred than Garrett's suggestion that the entire Antioch church laid hands on them.

I say this for this reason. Verse 1 refers to “the church at Antioch.” But does this refer to a single house church, to a number of house churches in Antioch, or to just the leadership of the church at Antioch? It could quite conceivably mean any of these. I think, of course, it refers to the Antioch council of elders, that is, the Antioch presbytery. This is more likely the case than either of the other possible referents because, not only did the Antioch church number in the tens of hundreds, if not thousands, by this time but also, as I argued in my essay, the rite of the laying on of hands is an authorizing act that can be performed only by a plurality of *male* elders/overseers (presbyters) (see 1 Tim. 4:14). Consequently, the Antioch church in its entirety, which would have included hundreds of women who have *no* authority to lay hands on anyone, could *not* have been the ordaining body. The ordaining body had to be only a portion of the Antioch church, this portion doubtless being the elders of the Antioch presbytery.

As for the meaning of the phrase “the whole church” in Acts 15:22, just as in the case above with respect to Antioch, the Jerusalem church by this time as well would have numbered in the thousands (Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7), and it defies reason to think that the assembly would have consulted these thousands of Jews in the church there for their concurrence in its decision to send Judas and Silas, together with Paul and Barnabas, back to Antioch. Since the universe of discourse in the Acts 15 context is the “church” represented by the elders from Antioch and Jerusalem, it is sufficient to conclude that Luke intended by his phrase, “the whole church,” the many house churches of Jerusalem who were represented at the assembly by their elders and nothing more. It simply cannot mean, as Garrett proposes, “the entire Jerusalem church.”

To conclude anything from Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 5:2, “Shouldn't you…have put out of your fellowship the man who did this” (NIV), regarding who in particular within the Corinthian church Paul would have thought should have addressed this offense, would be highly tendentious. The same is true of his statement in 5:4: “when you are assembled.” For me to say that he had only the *elders* at Corinth in mind and that they should have addressed the matter would be as biased as it is for Garrett and the commentators he cites to conclude that Paul believed that the entire church, meeting in solemn conclave and in

democratic fashion, should have done it. These verses simply do not give us enough information to decide anything for certain one way or another and thus they should be discounted as evidence for either Presbyterian or Congregational polity.

Permit me to say two more things about this passage. First, it would not have been inappropriate, as I suggested throughout my essay and in my exposition of Matthew 18:17 above, for Paul to have believed that the elders of the church at Corinth were the ones who should have felt the responsibility to address such an obvious moral offense in the church. Second, it may well be the case that Paul believed the entire congregation, given the gross moral obliquity that was present within it, should have assembled and directly disciplined this person. To conclude this is one thing. But to extract from this one event (and the one or two others like it) the entire polity of Congregational autonomy and independency is a theological reach of massive proportions and overthrows all the evidence I provided in my essay for Presbyterian connectionalism.

The biblically committed Congregationalist cannot deny that the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 (hardly a local church), that was comprised of elders from Antioch and Jerusalem and perhaps from other regions as well such as Syria and Cilicia, issued to the churches of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia its conciliar deliverance that reflected its council's careful deliberation and that it expected all of the local Gentile churches in these regions to abide by. He cannot deny that elders governed the New Testament churches. He cannot deny that the New Testament demands *visible* church unity before the watching world and that it is absolutely silent on ecclesial independency and autonomy. And he cannot deny that every Christian needs the benefits of the entire body of Christ and that mutual edification is the very purpose of the Spirit's gifts. This is all that Presbyterian connectionalists are asking their Congregationalist friends to acknowledge.

Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 2:6, “For such a one this punishment by *ton pleionon* is enough,” is in the same category as the previous texts. The issue turns on the intention of *ton pleionon.* It can be translated “the majority” as opposed to “the minority.” It can also be construed as a collective noun meaning “the many” in the sense of “the whole body.” This much is certain. But when Garrett declares, “In either case… Congregational polity is represented by the text,” he commits a *non sequitur,* for while the former rendering could support the notion that the entire congregation was involved in the original decision to punish, the latter rendering could be construed as the “whole church” represented by its governing elders. It would be a *non sequitur* on my part to say

that this is what Paul intended; it is equally a *non sequitur* for Garrett to say that this text unequivocally teaches Congregational polity.

By his own admission Garrett's "other possible texts" (Acts 1:21–26; 9:26–28; Gal. 6:1; 1 Cor. 16:3; 2 Cor. 8:22–24; Phil. 2:25; 2 Thess. 3:6; Rev. 2:14–16; 2:20–25) "may imply the exercise of Congregational polity," but provide at best "only indirect evidence" for such. Since Garrett himself declares that these texts "may imply" Congregational polity, which means as well that they may not, I will not address these texts.

The remainder of his evidence can be addressed with the following general remarks: First, the fact that *ekklesia* ("church") in the New Testament may refer mainly to local churches means nothing so far as determining what polity the New Testament churches practiced. Second, Garrett's statement, "In the New Testament there is an absence of evidence of any territorial organization of the church or the churches," begs the question under discussion. My entire essay laid out what I regard to be undeniable New Testament evidence for just such "territorial organization" in the form of Presbyterian connectionalism.

Third, I agree with Garrett that, because "elder" and "overseer" are convertible terms and refer to the same person and not to different offices, there is no New Testament basis for a monarchical or diocesan bishop. Fourth and finally, I agree with Garrett that it is inappropriate to hold that the New Testament provides no "system" or "pattern" of church government and that churches should simply be guided by expediency in matters of polity. I also agree with him that the New Testament does not provide a fully spelled-out, systematic model of church polity. Rather, it provides us with "a pattern of ecclesiastical organization and discipline in *outline,* not in *detail*," but a pattern sufficiently clear in outline that by good and necessary inference one may deduce its details. Where we differ is that Garrett thinks that "pattern in outline" points toward Congregational polity; I think it more clearly points toward Presbyterian connectionalism.

I enjoyed very much studying Garrett's carefully researched essay, and I appreciate the opportunity this volume gave me to interact with this renowned Baptist systematician.

Response by James R. White

What is the relationship between the congregation and the elders ordained of God? This seems to be the key difference between the plurality of elders concept and the Congregationalist viewpoint, at least as presented in this

work.[318] Do the elders derive their authority from the congregation, or is their office established by Christ as one of guidance and, in matters of faith, rulership? This presentation acknowledges the existence of pastors and elders but does not interact with the apostolic action of ordaining those elders in every church as a constituent element of *ordering* the church.

For one who believes in a plurality of elders in a local, autonomous church, the recognition of the actions of a local congregation (over against a distinct episcopacy) does not constitute an objection against the plurality of elders. Church discipline may involve the action of the entirety of the congregation (given the nature of the act itself, such would be natural, since it involves all the members withdrawing fellowship from the one thusly removed), but this gives us no insight into the role of the elders in the process, for example. These are the key issues that must be addressed in the comparison of Congregationalism and the view of a plurality of elders.

From my perspective, believing the local church to be led and directed by a plurality of elders, set apart and gifted for that task by the Holy Spirit of God, the role of the congregation is indeed central. The elders are not "extracongregational" in the sense of being somehow "above" others in their relationship to God, or by some "sacramental" power. The pastors/elders/overseers are indeed servants, but they serve in an office that is given authority by its very nature, function, and purpose. The elders are not isolated from the congregation so that their activities are beyond the examination and response of the congregation itself, and, in the biblical model, the actions of the one reflect the mind of the other. When Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, he singled out the *episkopoi* (overseers) and deacons in his salutation (Phil. 1:1), and in that same letter spoke of the need for a Spirit-borne unity. He writes:

> Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.…make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose (1:27; 2:2).

The believers at Philippi are to stand firm in "one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." They are to have the same mind and are to be united on one purpose. When we remember that Paul wrote to Timothy and Titus regarding the importance of maintaining sound doctrine as a leader in the church (1 Tim. 4:6, 16; 6:1, 3; 2 Tim. 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1, 7, 10), and yet

expresses his desire to the whole congregation at Philippi that they strive together for the faith of the gospel, we see the harmony that exists in the biblical revelation. The elders are required to refute those who contradict (Titus 1:9) and are to watch their teaching (1 Tim. 4:16), and yet the whole congregation is likewise to strive for the faith (Jude 3–4). It is not an either-or situation but a both-and situation. The elders teach with the authority of Christ, and yet the gospel is entrusted to all the people of God in the body of Christ, and all are held accountable for its purity and defense.

It is this unity that is to exist between the elders and the congregation that, I believe, gives full expression to the entirety of the biblical data. Surely there are passages that speak of the congregations acting as a unit; yet we also must deal with these passages as well:

> I left you in Crete, so that you could put in order the things that still needed doing and appoint church elders in every town (Titus 1:5 TEV).
>
> In each church they appointed elders, and with prayers and fasting, they commended them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust (Acts 14:23 TEV).
>
> Obey your leaders and follow their orders. They watch over your souls without resting, since they must give an account of their service. If you obey them, they will do their work gladly; if not, they will do it with sadness, and that would be of no help to you (Heb. 13:17 TEV).

The local assembly without elders has not been “set in order” in light of Titus 1:5. But importantly, *Titus* was to appoint the elders. The position is divinely ordained. It does not derive its existence, or authority, from the congregation. The elder's authority comes from Christ, and the congregation's role is that of recognition of God's gifting and calling. This may seem like a small point, but it is not. If one believes the elder's authority is derivative from the “consent of the governed” in essence, that authority becomes merely an extension of the gathered congregation. If, as it is seen in the above passages, the position is divinely ordained *and necessary therefore to the proper functioning of the congregation as a whole,* the authority exercised therein is seen to be Christ's authority. But since the elders are not set apart on some spiritual level from their fellow believers by some alleged sacramental authority, all forms of prelacy are excluded. The elders act in concert with the congregation, as fellow members thereof, yet they are called by the Holy Spirit into service in an office ordained by Christ through his apostles for the health and edification of the congregation.

The use of the term *authority* is troubling to some, though Hebrews 13:17

does not blush to speak in such terms. Obedience and submission to “leaders” in spiritual matters (they keep watch over the souls of the gathered believers) is directly stated in the text. These words, addressed to a congregation, clearly show the existence of positions of authority and leadership, resulting in a divinely judged responsibility on the part of those believers who are to be shepherds and pastors. If one must give an account for overseeing the souls of others, such an office implies doctrinal and moral authority. One cannot be judged for such things when one is limited to simply offering suggestions.

Dr. Garrett offered the following definition:

> [Congregationalism] is that form of church governance in which final human authority rests with the local or particular congregation when it gathers for decision-making. This means that decisions about membership, leadership, doctrine, worship, conduct, missions, finances, property, relationships, and the like are to be made by the gathered congregation except when such decisions have been delegated by the congregation to individual members or groups of members.

My main concern with the definition is that the divinely appointed offices of elder and deacon are not even noted. “Leadership” can take many forms in Congregationalism, but not in the Scriptures. The congregation is to be vitally involved in all areas of its life and ministry, but given that the elders are held accountable before God for the doctrinal purity and oversight of the believers, their authority must be beyond mere delegation.

Response by Paul F. M. Zahl

James Leo Garrett's essay expounding Congregational polity is one of the more open-ended and fluid positions within our book. Although he is tireless in expositing several New Testament texts that suggest Congregational polity, he understands this polity as potentially fit for a Presbyterian usage, a several-elder usage, and even something like a single-pastor usage. Garrett is not concerned to place polity at the top of the chart for Christian existence. Therefore his essay is more permeable than some of the others.

The weakness of the piece lies in its format. There are just too many footnotes.

Dr. Garrett defines Congregational polity as “that form of church governance in which final human authority rests with the local or particular congregation when it gathers for decision-making.” He distinguishes the Congregational way from any form of ecclesiastical or judicatory headship

existing over and above the local expression.

What is weak about this text is its undigested scholarly apparatus, which floods the reader with lists of commentaries and resources rather than digesting and integrating them. The argument is not synthetic enough.

The strength of the essay, on the other hand, is its broad and in the good sense liberal approach to Congregationalism, which allows people of almost every polity to tack onto certain strengths of local church government. Thus I can be an Episcopalian with a functionally local-church form of operating. I can be a Baptist, a Presbyterian, a Pentecostal, you name it, and still draw on a basically local-church approach to decision making, to the calling of ministers, even to theology applied concretely.

I appreciate Dr. Garrett's appeal to Martin Luther's 1523 treatise *That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proven by Scripture.* This is a piece which is easily missed amid the general conservatism of Luther's emerging church thinking. I also like the author's link of Congregational structure with the priesthood of all believers. The insistent tilt of the New Testament in the direction of democracy cannot be denied.

Garrett also sees, rightly I believe, an important connection between flexible mission strategy and the Congregational model. As an Episcopalian, I am struck, and struck hard, by the farreaching inability of most Episcopal dioceses to respond quickly or venturesomely to new contexts and cultural givens. We Episcopalians tend to be the very last to see and implement what needs to be done. Paging Tim Keller!

Dr. Garrett's summary sentence is useful: “Congregational polity is consistent with and closely related to Baptist definitions of a church, the priesthood of all Christians, the exercise of spiritual gifts, Christian growth, the witness of all Christians, the ministries of pastors and of deacons, church discipline, and the kingdom of God.”

The beating heart of this whole piece comes in fact at the very end. Here James Garrett distills the advantages of Congregational government. Here almost all of us can sign up: “Congregational polity is not an end in itself but rather a means to other ends.” Amen to that! And again I say, Amen.

CHAPTER 4

The Bishop-Led Church

The Episcopal or Anglican Polity Affirmed, Weighed, and Defended

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THE VERY REV. DR.THEOL. PAUL F. M. ZAHL[*]

Introduction

Protestant versions of the New Testament church aspire to be “catholic” in the true sense of the word. This is true, in principle, for every single case of Protestant expression. We are all, from the Plymouth Brother to the Anglican, from the Swedish Lutheran to the Baptist Independent, seeking to be “catholic” in the true sense of the word. In other words we are seeking to embody church in the way that is *universalizable.* We wish to embody principles for the Church of Christ that are valid in every time and every place, *semper ubique.* I do not believe there has been a sincere Christian from Silas Marner to Nathan Söderblom who was not aiming at universality, the real thing, no matter whether it was a back-street Bible study in Bedford or a primatial ecumenical procession in Stockholm.

We have to impute sincerity to all who work toward *ecclesia* on earth. The problem, however, the enduring obstacle to consensus among Christians, has been the fluidity, even the multiplicity of the evidence concerning “church” in the New Testament.

What exactly was the *presbyteriou* in 1 Timothy 4:14? Who were the *episkopois* in Philippians 1:1? What did they do? And how did the apostles function in the time of the Acts? What was the status of the Twelve in relation to local church leaders as the mission expanded? Were the gifts of pastoral and also teaching leadership *devolving,* moving across the fellowship according to Spirit-led necessity, like the “wave” that undulates through the stadium before a game? Or did the gifts incline toward a single, called person, there to settle and persist?

Does the New Testament demonstrate a movement toward “early” or “nascent” catholicism, as Ernst Käsemann asserted in 1963?[1] Did the early spirit of charismatic freedom and pluriformity harden into mold and form? Or is the whole notion of institutional Christianity *unbiblical,* as Emil Brunner famously suggested in 1951?[2] Was Kierkegaard right when he said, “There is nothing so displeasing to God as official Christianity?”[3] The New Testament evidence regarding church and patterns of ministry is furiously fought over. It always has been.

In the English-speaking world, the concept of church and what constitutes true catholicism became a central, not penultimate issue during the lead-up to the English Civil War—the era of the Puritans. To paraphrase former President Clinton, Is a “presbyter” a presbyter? And what is a “presbyter”? Is he just a “priest” “writ large?” Does it not depend on what “is” is? The question of church and therefore of ministry was engrossing to our Puritan ancestors in Christianity. And it was not just true for the Puritans. It was true also for the Anglicans who drove them to it! And it was true for the Roman Catholics, whose polemics from Continental Europe forced Bishop John Jewel to state what “Anglicanism” is in his *Apology of the Church of England* (1562). And it was true for the Presbyterians and the Independents, who from their side forced Richard Hooker to present an “Anglican” appeal distinct from other non-Roman views.

For myself, I believe that any period of Christian history for which ecclesiology and polity are the driving issues is decadent by definition. It is decadent because polity is a lesser interest in relation to the great question of the moral economy that governs the relation of humanity with God (i.e., justification). Polity is a lesser interest in relation to the great question of the objective or objectifiable presence of Christ in our era of his absence since AD 30 (i.e., the Lord's Supper controversy: How is Christ now present in the Holy Communion?). Polity is also a lesser interest in relation to the great question of the relation of the will of God to the wills of men (i.e., providence, predestination, and free will). History teaches that interest in polity breaks the waves of the oceanic tide of Christian theology only when other, larger issues are no longer the presenting, absorbing ones. When polity and ecclesiology become absorbing questions for the church, you can bet we are in a time of comparative *stasis.*

In a way, the recent vogue for ecclesiology in American Protestantism suggests complacency regarding the ultimate issues, by which they, the ultimates, have receded before the tide of engrossing secondaries. It may be a

measure of the “success” of American Christianity as a whole, at least in terms of numbers and financial supply, that we are so interested in polity. Certainly when you go to England today—or Switzerland or the Netherlands or the Republic of Ireland, for that matter—there is less interest among Christians in denomination and polity than in the United States. In Western Europe, the few committed Christians are facing such an uphill struggle for access and therefore impact, that the labels of “Church” and “sect” hardly apply at all anymore.

The Church of England, for example, is now licensing hundreds of LEPs (i.e., Licensed Ecumenical Projects). These LEPs are Christian communities that are jointly Anglican and Reformed, or Anglican and Methodist, or Roman Catholic and Church of England. I think of “the Christian Church on St. Mary's Isle,” near Gillingham, Kent, where Baptists, Methodists, Reformed, and Anglicans are worshipping together, in small but growing numbers, in hopes of reaching out to the thousands and thousands of unchurched people who surround them within a new government-sponsored housing project. On St. Mary's Isle, all bets are off when it comes to denomination. And the ecumenical is legal and *de iure*, not just *de facto*. LEPs are licensed and sponsored by the established Church of England. In areas where it is tough sledding for the Christian churches to remain open, the ecclesiology issue fades back, way back, to the back of the bus!

In America this is not so. Maybe we can one day deliver a legacy to Europe, in a period when Christianity starts to come back there, by dwelling on “church” questions in our context, from strength. “Church” questions are legitimate questions after all. But they are penultimate questions. They are penultimate, even marginal, in the experience of millions and billions. They are penultimate in human experience. No one ever wakes up in the “wee, wee hours,” crying uncontrollably at the top of his lungs, “I am an Episcopalian, I am an Episcopalian before all things, so help me God!”

Church questions are penultimate ones in the Bible. They are penultimate in the Bible because the evidence in Scripture is multiple, not necessary, and therefore universalizable. Anyone who argues in favor of the universality of a particular New Testament polity will always have to devalue or deemphasize one or another conflicting text.

From Scripture, in other words, I can argue a Presbyterian position; a Baptist position, in several flavors; a more or less Anglican/Lutheran position (whatever that means exactly); and certainly a Congregational/Independent position. I can argue all these positions, and others, too, although I cannot,

incidentally, sustain the Roman Catholic position. But I can argue none of these positions in such a way that the logic becomes necessary or binding. The New Testament evidence is simply too diverse. There is no one governing New Testament ecclesiology.

All this is by way of introduction to a chapter that affirms an Anglican or Episcopal position. I shall make and state the case gladly for a classic Anglican understanding of church. But it will be no more sincere, I feel sure, than any other view of the church that aims to be catholic in the true sense. It will also not be authoritative—it cannot be—because the Bible makes it impossible for anyone to be authoritative on this point.

The Episcopal position has definite strengths, commending strengths. It also has weaknesses, weaknesses that I have seen and lived with, even survived, right up to the present moment. I can gladly affirm the Episcopal or Anglican position and can honestly commend it. I can even defend it, but I cannot declare it or propagate it as final. It cannot be absolutized. It is not oracular. No Anglican, unless he or she be a crypto-Roman Catholic or a crypto-Presbyterian, can ever declare, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus.*

The Bene Esse *View of the Church*

The only good case which can be made for specific forms of church order or polity has got to be made under the sign of *bene esse. Bene esse* is the Latin phrase for "well-being." It refers to something that contributes to the well-being of a thing rather than to its essence or identity. We can say, for example, that Episcopal church order, the form of church government that is carried out by means of bishops, is a good thing, adding to the *bene esse* or well-being of the church. But Episcopal church order is not constitutive of the church. To say that a particular form or feature of church government identifies the *being* of the thing or establishes its core identity: that is the other theory, the *esse* theory of church.

Some Anglican Christians believe, for example, that government by bishops defines the true church. They say that unless a church has bishops, it is not a true church: it is defective. Its DNA is off. It can have everything else—the gospel message, the sacraments, true doctrine, and good order—but if it does not have bishops, it is defective. It is a sect.

Classic Presbyterianism asserts the same theory about Presbyterian church government: any church that is not administered by presbyteries or "sessions" of

presbyters is fundamentally lacking. Similarly, you can impute the *esse* theory of church to Baptists who argue that only a church that practices believer's baptism is a New Testament church worthy of the name. Churches that practice infant baptism are in their very charter of identity flawed. They are sectarian. Some Baptists actually unchurch other Christians on this basis alone. *Esse* thinking can be found in sectors and schools of thought throughout all polities of Christianity. It is warp and woof of the Roman Catholic position, although it has generally been stated more sensitively since the Second Vatican Council.

"Church" is a fought-over landscape in the history of Christianity. What does constitute church, its *esse*? And what contributes to its good, its *bene esse*, but is not constitutive of it? *Except in the case of gospel issues—i.e., word and sacrament—the* esse *view of church order is always arbitrary.* Promoting a system of church government to a place of ultimate importance in defining identity is divisive by definition. The *esse* view is the self-understanding of the Church of Rome. It is also the view held by the American denomination known as the Churches of Christ. It is sometimes the view of "high-church" Episcopalians. It is also the view of ideological Presbyterians and numerous Baptist fellowships. It was the view of some Independents during the Puritan era in England and was also the view of many of our Pilgrim fathers who emigrated from England to New England. It is also the view of Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses and any number of fringe Christian bodies. It has never, gratefully, been the view of the United Methodists!

The Esse *View of the Church*

The starting point of this essay on the Episcopal or Anglican position concerning church polity is that we affirm the *bene esse* view and repel the *esse* view. The *esse* view will always be arbitrary, and therefore divisive, because it features and underscores one particular system of church order as being formative of identity. The *esse* view takes a quality such as the "apostolic succession" of bishops, or a system of local-church organization, or the form of administering a sacrament, even a particular written order of worship, and makes it into the essence of the thing. It puts one singular aspect of church culture at the absolute center of its life-giving double helix. The *esse* view is the triumph of form over substance in the DNA of Christian inheritance.

My objection to the *esse* view, which has, it is true, been held sincerely by millions and millions of people over centuries, is not the old "liberal" notion that

all roads lead to the top of the mountain. My objection is not to constitutive distinctives as such. That objection is as arbitrary as the opposite view, which seizes on one disputed point and makes it paramount and all-important. No, the necessary objection to the *esse* position is not the objection that springs from ideological pluralism and diversity.

My objection to the *esse* view is this: *it can never be sustained from the text*, which in our case is the New Testament. It can certainly not be sustained from church tradition, as the witness of tradition is, like all things human, diverse in the extreme. We have to object to the *esse* view, whether it originates from Rome or from the Westminster Confession, because it is unprovable from Scripture.

Richard Newton, an American Evangelical Episcopalian who served parishes in Philadelphia during the mid-nineteenth century, wrote as follows:

> No form of Church organization is given us in the New Testament. All those now existing are of human origin. They bear the marks of human infirmity. Imperfection, in one form or other, clings to them all. We never shall see a perfect Church on earth till our Lord returns from heaven to make one. In each of the denominations around us I could readily point out something which it would be harder for me to bear than anything that I meet in my own Church.[4]

Yet the New Testament experience of church does hold two broad and bold lines of unity. These two broad lines of unity, running from Jerusalem to Rome, from Samothrace to Antioch, are the good news about Christ and his two “left-behind” commands, to baptize and to observe the Lord's Supper. In the New Testament, the Word of Christ, the gospel, is constitutive of the church, together with the gospel sacraments, baptism and the Lord's Supper. Order and church discipline are important, but St. Paul addressed communities as Christian churches that had neither good morals nor good order. The proper form of word and sacrament fellowships in the New Testament is extremely hard to pin down, or to pin down within definite, concrete forms capable of being transmitted. Absolutes concerning polity shipwreck on the text. They can sometimes shipwreck even on different translations of the same text.

But there is more to say. There is a greater issue at work here that scuttles and beaches the *esse* view of church in favor of the *bene esse* view. This is the issue of the law, theologically understood, and the issue specifically of the so-called “third use of the law.”

A rift opened up in the second phase of the Protestant Reformation between those who taught that the church is constituted by two things and those who taught that the church is constituted by three things. Luther and his followers, as well as the first architects of the Church of England, believed from their study of the New Testament that two things define the Christian church. It is defined by the pure Word of God preached and by the orderly administration of the two Bible sacraments, Baptism and Holy Communion. This view, which represents the earliest stream of ecclesiology in Reformation thought, is expressed classically in Article XIX of the Church of England's *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* (1563):

> The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

The second stream in Reformation thought, contained in the work of Calvin and more especially of Calvin's great disciple, Theodore Beza, who was later followed by the English Puritans, believed there is a *third* defining mark of the visible church of Christ. The third defining mark of the visible church of Christ is discipline. The outward discipline of the church is essential to its existence. The view of Calvin and his followers was expressed classically by the Reformed theologian Melchior Leydecker, writing in 1689:

> The Church ought to be considered from the standpoint of its outward form. It is seen in congregations where the Word of God is preached, the Sacraments are offered, and *discipline is exercised* (emphasis added), together with all other things that contribute to church order.…The visible Church is established wherever the preaching of the Word takes place, the Sacraments are distributed, and discipline is brought to bear, all being supervised by proper local authority.[5]

The Problem with the "Third Use of the Law"

The idea that church order and discipline is necessary to complete the doctrinal and sacramental life of the church originated in a particular teaching concerning the law. Calvin believed that Christian people require being informed of what the law of God requires of them even *after* their conversion.

Luther and Calvin agreed that the law of God is essential to restraining the chaos of the sinful world. They agreed further that the law of God is essential to

bring the human being to a knowledge of her or his sinful condition in order for a person to receive the grace of God by faith. But Calvin differed with Luther in that he proposed that the converted person needs a kind of steady, gentle reminder of what is expected of him. The motivating and impelling Holy Spirit of Galatians 5 is not enough! Or rather, the Spirit works through the law of God in a sort of "third" way for pilgrims on the road to the New Jerusalem. Christians, even truly converted Christians, require information about the law in order consciously to pattern their lives after the example of Christ and the New Testament Christians in the New Testament church.

For the first Reformers of the Reformation, including the English ones, God's grace in the believer's heart inclines the person spontaneously, naturally, unselfconsciously toward the works of love. There is no need for a road map. The fruit of the Spirit, growing from the internal stimulus—the internal stimulus alone—of the Spirit of God within, *coincides* with what the law requires. The Christian does not need concrete instructions concerning the shape and demands of self-giving. It just happens. As St. Paul observed, there is no law required to stimulate love and goodness (Gal. 5:23).

Calvin, with Beza, connected the "third use of the law" with church order and church discipline. To them, a church that could not expel repeat-offender cheats and adulterers and slanderers and thieves was no church at all. It was a bad and impotent church, finally an apostate, rejected church.

This is why the Reformed family in Christianity has been more solidly and uniformly organized, and also more politically effective, by and large, than the Lutheran and Anglican families.[6]There existed this conscious difference over the law, which led to a difference over church government, which led to an *esse* self-understanding versus a *bene esse* self-understanding. It is why old-time Presbyterian theologians like James Bannerman read today more like Roman Catholic apologists than they would ever have wished. Although the Roman Catholics have a somewhat different concept in practice of the law and its uses than the Reformed, both approaches see order and discipline as essential rather than as enhancing. "High-church" thinkers within Anglicanism have echoed this idea in their own context. They have represented order as crucial, not secondary; as ultimate, not penultimate.

Within Protestantism, the question of church order is locked deep inside the question of the *extent* of the law's reach within the reign of grace. Luther thought that there is no supplementally needed or normative law beyond the *original* (i.e., Mosaic) Law. The Mosaic Law leads us all, Christian and non-Christian

alike, to the reality of our own paralyzed sinfulness. There is no need for further enlightenment. There is no need for further instruction. There is no need for "motivational workshops" and cheerleading. No Tony Robbins! The Holy Spirit is sufficient entirely to prompt the justified and being-sanctified person to the works of love: the Christian life.

Calvin, however, believed that there *is* such an illuminating book of the road for Christians. And it is needed. You can't pass your test without it! Without it you are strictly on probation.

Calvin conceived the second sections of several Pauline epistles, the parts that exhort on the basis of the theology contained in the first parts of these epistles, to be precedents for a "third use." Luther and Cranmer, the Anglican, regarded the hortatory words of Romans 12–15, of Philippians 4, of 1 Thessalonians 4–5, of Colossians 3–4, and of other letters as *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*. Luther saw the ethical imperatives directed by St. Paul to believers as being essentially pictures of the way things actually go in Christian experience. That is, Christians baptized in the overwhelming (and also continuing, daily) catharsis of repentance and faith, do not need to be told to love the brethren and "be good." They do this automatically, spontaneously, "naturally," according to the new nature of the twice-born, and from the heart.

But Calvin was unsatisfied with Luther's reception of the Pauline ethics. He did not wish to see the Apostle's exhortation as descriptive only. Calvin thought we need reminding. Anglicanism, ever since the first wave of the English Reformation, its "Luther" phase represented by William Tyndale, John Frith, Thomas Bilney, and to some extent Thomas Cranmer himself, has been double-minded concerning the law's "third use." The Articles of Religion and the Prayer Book contain nothing that resembles the "third use of the law" as Calvin and his successors conceived it, but later interpreters in England were drawn to the "third use." And after Anglican Puritanism, the official Church of England sector of Puritan thought, collapsed in the 1630s, the Anglicans who won the theological struggle against those Puritans—the Anglicans, in other words, who embraced a "Catholic" model of church life—considered the third mark of the church not as "discipline" but as episcopal government.

The first Anglican Reformers held to no "third use" whatsoever and to no third mark of the Christian church. But the Puritans moved clearly in that direction. That the "high Anglicans," who finally beat the Puritans decisively, abhorred the Puritans while at the same time hugging to their breasts the idea of a third mark, is ironic. In any case, it became the same thing *in practice*: a third

mark of the church, Episcopal church order, rather than just two marks, the gospel of the Bible and the Sacraments.

The result among these Anglicans, who ruled so high-handedly from 1660 and were never put properly in their place even in the age of later "latitudinarian" Anglicanism, was that they became much less open to other Christians, deployed a grossly alienating self-righteousness; they showed perilously less confidence in that which is so much more important, *the gospel as such.* It is Anglicanism's notable persisting weakness that we have tended, unless criticized from within, to substitute Episcopacy for moral discipline as the third mark of the visible church. The Laudians, the followers of Archbishop William Laud in the early seventeenth century, were the first to do this in our tradition in a big way. Ironically, they embraced the way of the people they could not abide, the Puritans, simply substituting "Episcopacy" for "Congregational discipline" as the third distinguishing mark of the church. We have been in recovery ever since.[7]

Elizabethan Givens

The polity of the Anglican communion is noted—anchored—in particular historical circumstances governing and surrounding the events of the English Reformation, especially that phase of the Reformation that followed the accession of Queen Elizabeth I in 1560. To say that our polity is rooted in external circumstances makes it sound a little lightweight (Christianity Lite!). That is only partly true. All polities are influenced by outward circumstances. All polities are shaped by forces external to the core interests. All polities are conditioned, even those that claim most strenuously to be biblical. It is true also that history can provide fortifying strengths to a polity as well as saddling it with besetting weaknesses.

What happened under Elizabeth I was a kind of synthesis resulting from the conflict between a Protestant ascendancy that occurred under King Edward VI (1546–1553) and a Roman Catholic ascendancy that occurred under Queen Mary (Mary Tudor or "Bloody Mary," who reigned from 1553 to 1558). A Protestant/biblical idea of church came on strong and basically succeeded under Edward.[8] It was repelled and retarded under Edward's half sister, a fervent Roman Catholic.[9] Within one decade, the Christian church in England, the church catholic in that country, had displayed two faces, two Janus-like portraits of "church." One face had been emphatically Protestant, the other emphatically

Roman Catholic. Both faces, naturally, claimed to be catholic in the true sense.

When Henry VIII's daughter by Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth Tudor, succeeded to the throne after her half sister Mary's death from ovarian cancer, Elizabeth was in a precarious position. She was a Protestant by birth and therefore in principle because her mother's marriage to the king was regarded as illegitimate by Rome. Elizabeth was either the bastard daughter of Henry *or* she was, but only according to Protestant thinking, his true daughter and therefore the legitimate heir to the throne. She could only regard herself as queen, with the rest of the nation, if the Reformation that started under Henry were a legitimate change. So Elizabeth had to be a Protestant. Moreover, Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn herself, had been a committed Protestant.

However, Elizabeth Tudor was also conservative by temperament. She became uncomfortable with the logic of consistent or “forward” Protestant thought. She feared that advanced Protestantism would lead to dissent and disloyalty. She was offended by people like John Knox, who wrote that female monarchs were contrary to the Bible. And she was prudently afraid and watchful of the possibility of civil war. Her fear of civil war, a recurrence of the Wars of the Roses, had been her father's lifelong fear.

Elizabeth also liked the style of church in which she had been reared as a child: a “Lutheran-type” reformed Catholicism, which included crucifixes on altars, an old-fashioned liturgy, and even unmarried clergy. Queen Elizabeth I was destined to be a temporizer in religion. She simply had to be.

This whole long chapter of Anglican birth pangs in the 1560s, 1570s, and 1580s, has been hugely written about. It has been exhaustively, massively discussed, and interpreted. So intentionally ambiguous was Elizabeth's religion that it is notoriously hard to pin down her exact sentiments. The fact is, it is impossible to pin them down. Attacked from the right by Roman Catholics who viewed her as an illegitimate heretic and attacked from the left by Protestants who saw her as dawdling and hesitating in matters of great importance for the reformation of the church, she could not please the two “wings” of English opinion, the Roman Catholic loyalists and the advanced Puritans influenced by Calvin and the Reformed sector.

Elizabeth pleased *most* people, however, and benefited greatly from the 1580 defeat of the Spanish Armada at the hands of her navy and the weather. When Elizabeth died in 1603, England was a consciously Protestant country, at all levels of society, though with vocal and germinating minorities on both edges. The more vocal minority existed on the “left” or Puritan side of the

national church. It needs to be stated very clearly, by the way, that the main Puritan elements and thinking were located *within* the Church of England, not outside it. Yes, there were Separatist voices, but the main Puritan spokesmen, such as Edmond Grindal and later George Abbott and Joseph Hall, were within the church. They were convinced communicants of the Church of England.

The polity of Anglicanism is directly connected with the historical circumstances outlined thus far.[10] Because of the Erastianism inherent in the English church setup, i.e., because Elizabeth the queen was supreme governor of the Church of England and also the first "fully loaded" supreme governor after the initial chaos of the Reformation explosion, Elizabeth's particular personality and interests could only have a huge, almost overriding effect on church thinking. Her tastes and sentiments could only be extremely influential on the self-understanding of English Christians.

But unlike Frederick the Wise of Saxony, who was "sold out" to Luther's theological interests—I mean that in a good sense—or the town council of Zürich, who embraced from conviction the insights of Zwingli, holding them straightforwardly without reservation, Elizabeth was an ambiguous character. She was a Protestant in her DNA. She had to be in order to rule with any security at all. But Elizabeth also knew what she was up against. She had to engender unity in the nation. And her own theological opinions did not move beyond the religious opinions of her mother, Anne Boleyn. Her mother had died before Anne had the time to integrate her theology with her churchmanship.[11] Anne, for example, would never have tolerated a crucifix in her private chapel, or at least not for long, as Elizabeth did for years. Elizabeth was theologically stunted, bound to a more or less "confirmation-class" level of Christian reflection. Her descendants within Anglicanism have been like the sand by the sea: innumerable.

A Wax Nose

All this is to say that Elizabeth's "Anglicanism" was and is a wax nose. It can be shaped in a Protestant direction, and it can be shaped in a Catholic or non-Roman but "high-church" direction. It can even be shaped in a "liberal" or "broad-church" direction. After all, is she not supposed to have said, "I refuse to build windows into men's souls"? In her will to unite as many people as possible into a broadly Protestant and nontyrannizing church, did Elizabeth not show her successors and descendants the way toward a broadly "inclusive" style of church

life?

The answer is yes, and the answer is no. In Elizabeth's historical givens and within her straitened, frozen religious temperament, we do indeed find some opposites contained. But it is the synthesis of a Lutheran theology of justification, Lutheran-type Erastianism or state-control of the church, and Calvinist ideas of the Holy Communion. Add some residual “Catholicism,” “Catholic” pomp and circumstance with a stately cathedral tradition, and you have a melting pot of ideas, an ecclesiastical crucible, the sweets and savories mixed into one. This melting pot produced a *via media*—the often-used term—between systematic or strenuous Puritan Protestantism and “high church” state Protestantism.

One thing Elizabeth was not, however, and never could be. Elizabeth was never remotely “Roman.” She could not be, both for pressing political reasons and for reasons of her person, the daughter of a mother who had lost her head as a forward Protestant.

What English Anglicanism became was a catchment area holding *three* distinct understandings of Christianity. The old maxim concerning the Anglican Church basically came true: “The Church of England has Calvinist articles, a popish liturgy, and Arminian clergy.” Translated in contemporary terms, this means: Anglicanism is broadly Protestant in its theology, Catholic in its forms of worship and its continuity with the old or medieval church, and liberal or “open” with respect to the people it ordains.

Such a breadth of “inclusiveness,” to use the current term, sounds almost statuesque. And it has real virtue. What a quality worthy of applauding, to have within one's borders *à la* Jabez's prayer such an “enlarged tent.” There is nothing uncatholic, in the true and universal sense of that word, in a church which offers Bible theology within a prayer book context and which continues simultaneously with the most ancient traditions of Christianity. Nor is there anything uncatholic in boasting of a “liberal” clergy, if *liberal* means broad-minded, tolerant, noninsular, and liberal in spirit.

The problem came when “catholic” liturgy became connected with Roman Catholic ideas of priesthood, prelacy, and penultimacy. In recent decades, the problem came when *liberal* no longer meant generous but meant anti-Scripture and antitradition. It is probably true in principle that one of Anglicanism's great strengths, an abiding strength, consists in its blend of Reformation theology, historical continuity, and well-educated, therefore well-grounded optimistic liberal-heartedness. *De facto*, however, Anglicanism's persisting weaknesses is

its vulnerability to ideological “Catholicism” (i.e., “Catholicism” that is nonpapal but authoritarian in other ways),[12] on the one hand, and theological “liberalism” (i.e., “liberalism” that is “modernist” or antiorthodox in principle because it is antiauthority in principle), on the other.[13]

Forced Togetherness: Three Churches in One

Anglicanism at its best devolves into an ethos that comprehends three schools of thought, Protestant, Catholic, and Liberal, within enlarged and truly “catholic” borders. Words like *diverse, pluralist,* and *inclusive* do not do justice to the Anglican phenomenon. Each of these words inclines downward toward a “lowest common denominator” of Christian life that elevates unity over ideas, form over substance. Each of these words is able to suggest a rapprochement with current American attitudes that value the unity of all truths as one single “truth,” and do not wish to make distinctions or judgments. Anglicanism can easily contract into light-colored Jell-o with no sparkle or brilliance.

The word *comprehensive* is better—though it, too, is not perfect. “Comprehension” describes an elastic entity, which stretches to include alternatives, even exclusive alternatives, without hugging them into ropes of taffy, like an anaconda with a squirrel. Anglicanism requires a metaphor that does not diminish distinctives but rather allows and enables their development and thriving.

Anglicanism/Episcopalianism is a phenomenon of Christian history that comprehends three distinct representations of Christianity within one institution or, properly stated, one communion. It is actually three churches within one organization.

Anglicanism/Episcopalianism is not an entity derived from compressing three understandings into one such that the one no longer has arms or legs and has become a single smoothed oily ball, the result of pressing three Cadillacs into one compact shape. It is not, in other words, a lowest common denominator of Christianity, an unjagged and thoroughly unangular, muted thing. Sometimes it looks that way! Such an entity may be capable of attracting moderate types who are uncomfortable with “extremes” of feeling or expression. And yes, Anglicanism feels “English,” according to some readings of what it means to be English: measured and all soft-spoken and equivocating. (But what about perfidious Albion?) If equivocation equals Englishness, no wonder the Pilgrims sailed away! I wish here to repel the idea that Episcopalianism is tepid. We have

got to repel such a notion, as U. S. Grant sought to repel the army of General Lee in the wilderness “all down the line and if it takes all summer!”

What English Christianity became by requirement during the tense time of Elizabeth I was a tensile organism holding in tension three churches, one Protestant, one Catholic, and one Liberal. At its best, this polity allowed a Spirit-led vitality to be released for service within all three of its distinct expressions. At its worst, this polity sapped the juice from the vine and left a dried and withered husk. When Anglicanism is at its worst, serious Christians leave it in order to become Roman Catholics, and needy people move beyond it to become “free-church” evangelicals and neo-pentecostals.

In this essay we are considering Anglicanism in its ideality, Episcopalianism in principle. If it is in fact a sort of big house, supporting a roof over three distinct expressions or traditions, are there still any features to it, any attributes that *link* the three? Is there a common denominator or denominators? Do Anglican Protestantism and Anglican Catholicism and Anglican Liberalism possess something in common? Surely it cannot be just “Englishness” or the specific circumstances of four or five decades in one nation's history during the sixteenth century? Would that be enough to hang a church on, a church of about seventy million people worldwide? *Me genoito!* Surely not! If so, Anglicanism would be a contemptible instance of “Christianity-Lite;” triviality masquerading as solution.

Yet the three genres of Christianity that have lived so long together—in a significant degree of forced togetherness, it has to be said—within English and Anglican Christianity do share some common ground. There *is* something to Anglicanism, be it Protestant, Catholic, or Liberal. There are themes and stresses in common. I now come to the core of my argument.

The “Threefold” Order of Ministry

The first connecting wire for the three entities existing under one roof in an otherwise uncomfortable proximity is *Episcopacy.* Episcopacy is the institution by which bishops (or *episkopois*) govern the visible church. The institution of Episcopacy assumes three orders, or levels, of ordination. *Ordination* is the word for “setting apart” or *ordering* individuals for leadership within the Christian family, the church.

The first “order” in an Episcopal polity is the *deacon,* a set-apart “servant” (or *diakonos*) to aid the “presbyter” (or *presbyteros*) and “bishop” (or *episkopos*)

in his work. Historically and because of the ordering of “deacons” in Acts 6 to distribute food to the widows—while the original disciples continued to focus on praying and preaching—deacons have been cast in a helping, background role. In practice, until very recently, most deacons have simply been “presbyters in training.” That is *de facto* what deacons have been.[14]

The second order of clergy, within the “threefold” ministry that is assumed within the polity of Episcopacy, is the presbyter/elder, often translated in the Anglican world as “priest.” The Greek word is *presbyteros.* It refers to an elder/leader in the local congregation and was contracted by the English language to “priest.” I place “priest” in quotation marks because it is an unsatisfactory equivalent for presbyter. It was also rarely used in mainstream Episcopal or Anglican proper parlance between 1560 and 1979. At the time it was contracted to “priest,” however, it picked up, like a magnet, some associations from early Catholicism. These associations were linked with the *real* word for “priest” in Greek, which is *hiereus.* That word, *hiereus,* had always meant “priest” in the Old Testament (or Greek mythological) sense of a *sacrificing agent in the temple,* a purified individual set aside to do mediating business with God on behalf of tainted human beings. This man (or woman, in some forms of ancient Greek religion), had to be ritually clean, *perfectly* ritually clean, and therefore acceptable, like a lamb without defect, to the great God, the consuming Fire with whom we have to do.

This may sound complicated and overly “nuanced” in a negative sense, as in, “Whuh?” “What's it all about, and how complex does ministry have to be?” But the Christian tradition is two thousand years old, and it came directly out of another two thousand year tradition: Judaism. So when the early church tried to organize itself, and whenever the church has tried to reform itself since, it has had to pull with it a large train of conceptual baggage.

Let me sum up the situation in order to say what's what. First, deacons are servants, ordained in principle for the purpose of supporting “priests” and bishops to do their work: prayer and preaching. In practice, deacons are apprentice presbyters. In experience, therefore, there are only *two* orders of ordained minister: presbyter and bishop.[15] Second, presbyters are fully ordained elders who are given local oversight to preach and pray, which also means conduct worship and administer the two sacraments. In Anglicanism, only presbyters can officiate at the Holy Communion and pronounce absolution and blessing in the name of Christ. Presbyters are also the ones usually to perform baptisms and solemnize marriages, although in principle a deacon can do those

things. “Priestly” functions in the normal Anglican setup are the Lord's Supper, baptism, and the absolutions/blessings at services.

On the other hand, presbyters are not priests in the Old Testament or *hiereus* sense of the word. According to Hebrews 9 in the New Testament, only Jesus himself is and is sufficient to be our High Priest. No human being is or can be a priest before God. Only someone who is perfect can stand in the unspannable distance between God and the world, between God and man. Christ is our priest because he is the only (sufficient and acceptable) mediator between God and us. He alone is understood to be sufficient to stand in the infinite space between our original sin and God's righteous judgment. We presbyters who come after Christ are ministers of his New Covenant. Christ, however, and Christ alone, is the Priest.

Because the first Anglican prayer books used the word “priest” occasionally to denote an ordained minister—“priest,” in other words, as shorthand for “presbyter,” but who knows if there was not a little mischief contained in the retention of the noun—the seed or “Romanizing germ” of Catholic views of ministerial priesthood, remained pregnant within Anglicanism.[16] It has never been pulled up.

In practice, the word *priest* was never ever used by the vast majority of American Episcopalians (except for a conspicuous but small minority of Anglo-Catholics) until the late 1970s, when a tendentious “catholicizing” school of thought first took over the project of liturgical revision that issued in the 1979 version of the Book of Common Prayer. Today the word *priest* is used almost universally by American Episcopalians to mean “minister.”

For the author, the ubiquitous use of the word *priest* sounds alien and artificial. It still makes me wince every time I hear it. In any event, it is the unscriptural importation of a superannuated *Old Covenant* idea into Christian church-speak. It does violence to the identity of Christian ministers as followers in the train of the one High Priest.[17]

Episcopacy and Catholicity: Bishops and Bible Doctrine

If deacon is the first order in a threefold scheme (which is really a twofold scheme), and if presbyter is the second order, then bishop or *episkopos* is the third order. Another translation for the Greek word *episkopos* is “overseer,” even “superintendent.” The Lutheran churches when they have had bishops, as well as

the United Methodist Church, have usually intended the word *bishop* to mean "superintendent." Anglicans of all schools of thought, and also Roman Catholics, have understood the *episkopoi* or bishops to be symbolic guardians of unity and also of continuity. Only the bishop has the authority—or, in high-church practice, the magic hands or "pipeline"—to ordain presbyters and deacons. In the bishop's unique ordaining power lies the validity of the church: its "apostolic succession" going back in one unbroken line to the apostles themselves and to Peter, and through Peter to Jesus.

The office of bishop is also set aside to perform the rite of confirmation. We do not have to get involved here in the meaning of confirmation, for confirmation, like almost everything else in matters of Christian polity, is disputed. What we *can* say emphatically concerning the Episcopal order is that bishops alone are permitted to ordain other ministers. Thus bishops on any reading embody the continuity of the church, as well as its unity.

Episcopacy is thus the form of church government by which bishops represent the true catholicity, continuity, and Christianness of the Christian family. This catholicity of the church is expressed in its ministry.

But here is the sticking point: *What is catholicity?* What are we talking about exactly? What is the catholic "thing" or substance that is being passed on? What is the essence, the *esse,* of continuous church from AD 29 to the present moment?

The threefold order of ministry that culminates in the order of bishops is intended to sustain and safeguard the church's catholicity. The church's catholicity consists in its preaching of the pure Word of God and its faithful administration of the two Bible or "gospel" sacraments: Baptism and Holy Communion. Those are the only sacraments instituted by Christ himself. Anglican catholicity is expressed in the famous Article 19 of Religion. Article 19 crystallized the Reformation view of the *esse* of the Catholic Church. New bishops were intended by the English Reformers to safeguard and nurture the two great and sole marks of Catholicism, the Word and the two Sacraments, and most especially the *first.*[18]

Now read the following questions posed to bishops before their consecration, according to the old rite, which held good in the American Episcopal Church until 1979:

> Are you persuaded that the Holy Scriptures contain all Doctrine required as necessary for eternal salvation through faith in Jesus Christ?

> And are you determined out of the same Holy Scriptures to instruct the people committed to your charge; and to teach or maintain nothing, as necessary to eternal salvation, but that which you shall be persuaded may be concluded and proved by the same?
>
> Will you then exercise yourself in the Holy Scriptures, and call upon God by prayer for the true understanding of the same; so that you may be able by them to teach and exhort with wholesome Doctrine, and to withstand and convince the gainsayers?
>
> Are you ready, with all faithful diligence, to banish and drive away from the Church all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God's Word; and both privately and openly to call upon and encourage others to the same?
>
> Will you deny all ungodliness and worldly lusts, and live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world; that you may show yourself in all things an example of good works unto others, that the adversary may be ashamed, having nothing to say against you?
>
> Will you maintain and set forward, as much as shall lie in you, quietness, love, and peace among all men; and diligently exercise such discipline as by the authority of God's Word, and by the order of this Church, is committed to you?[19]

These are dazzling, splendid questions! They are shining examples for all models or polities of evangelical and in the true sense catholic church order. No Southern Baptist pastor, no independent minister of God's Word, no Presbyterian master of the manse, not even a Plymouth Brother could object to the principles of a single one of them. Those questions are suffused with zeal for Bible, doctrine, and truth.

How revealing it is to compare the “old” classic questions addressed to bishops on the verge of office, with the post-1979 questions posed on the same occasions:

> Will you be faithful in prayer, and in the study of Holy Scripture, that you may have the mind of Christ? Will you boldly proclaim and interpret the Gospel of Christ, enlightening the minds and stirring up the conscience of your people?
>
> As a chief priest and pastor, will you encourage and support all baptized people in their gifts and ministries, nourish them from the riches of God's grace, pray for them without ceasing, and celebrate with them the

sacraments of our redemption?

Will you guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the church?

I compare the “new” questions with the “old” ones in order to demonstrate the gap that exists, a gap to which we shall return, between Episcopalian *ideology* (i.e., the 1662/1928 Prayer Book) and Episcopalian *reality* (i.e., the 1979 Book). The new questions to bishops are subjective, horizontal, and hinged to unity. The old questions were objective, vertical, and hinged to the Bible. The gap is massive and spiders live down there, as in the celebrated (and banned) “spider pit” scene in the original *King Kong* (1933).

The point for us here is that Episcopacy was understood by the Reformers to be an office the exercise of which could guarantee and protect the church's gospel and Bible—hence the Church's “Catholic” identity. Bishops were servants of the Word, and more or less nothing else. “What orthodoxy is in the realm of reflection, episcopacy is in the realm of practice and order: an instrument through which the church is recalled to Christianness, to the appropriateness of its action and speech to the truth of the gospel.”[20]

The strength of Episcopacy was understood by the Reformers and by their prayer books to be its orientation to Bible doctrine. That was the thing, and it is glorious. This emphasis derived from the fact that the main movers in the English Reformation were in fact bishops. They preached the “new,” catholic doctrine of Luther right down, up, and across their dioceses. Bishops like Ridley and Cranmer and Latimer, Grindal, Mathew, Hooper and Jewel, and many, many others, were men of the Bible's Word. This they would have wanted to say about themselves. They were evangelists and preachers, not sacramentalists and “liturgists.”[21] The strength of early English Episcopacy was the power and magnitude of its adherence to the Word written and proclaimed.

Episcopacy and Mission Fuel

The force of the early doctrinal Episcopacy of the English Church fueled its propulsive missionary spirit. John Wesley would have felt completely comfortable with these men. The first bishops of the reformed Church of England had an awesome challenge before them. Their full efforts were required to convert their country! This was really true. The older, conservative, and somewhat lax Roman Catholic piety needed to be turned toward the scriptural light. Time was short, given the uncertain Tudor succession and the international

police keeper, Spain. Theological Episcopacy was connected to mission. They were grafted on each other.

So here is the second strength of Episcopacy. It is supposed to fuel and propel mission. One individual, one person, can do it. Like the hero of Stephen King's heroic novel *The Tommyknockers,* in which there is much ado about “one man” who destroys single-handedly a massive extraterrestrial menace in order to save the world—one bishop, in one diocese, is sufficient to lead the charge. One man's call, one man's oversight and preaching, is able to make a difference, *the* difference sometimes.

The Downside: Prelacy

If the empirical and also intended strength of Episcopacy is doctrine-fueling mission by means of one good officeholder, the empirical but unintended weakness of Episcopacy is *prelacy.* Prelacy is the authoritarian “personal rule” of one man.[22] Prelacy occurs when a bishop subject to no or few statutory constraints becomes a tyrant over the church, the “Little King” of Johnny Hart's comic strip. Prelacy has emerged several times in the history of the Anglican/Episcopal Church. There was Archbishop Laud and his inquisitional “Star Chamber” in the seventeenth century. There were a couple of bishops in the eighteenth century who gave absolutely no “slack” to John Wesley and drove him and his followers to desperate frustration—hence the birth of the United Methodist Church. There was Samuel Seabury, first consecrated bishop of the American Episcopal Church, who was strenuously intolerant of Puritans and Congregationalists. There were the “high-church” bishops in Maryland and Illinois during the early and mid-1800s, who persecuted the District of Columbia Evangelicals and deposed Charles Cheney in Chicago. There was Bishop Manning of New York in the 1930s, and very recently, Bishop Richard Grein, also of New York, who walked a sort of Mazarin maze to the tune of “Benedictine Spirituality” and silenced every single voice of criticism.

Fortunately, American Episcopalians challenged primatical prelacy during the mid-nineteenth century. It was challenged by means of a series of spectacular trials of “high church,” highhanded prelatical bishops. But it comes back. It keeps coming back. It always will, given human nature. Wolves in sheep's clothing have been a blessedly rare phenomenon in Christianity. But the episcopacy is an easy target for such persons: *Jamaica Inn* (Daphne du Maurier) in purple! But Baptists have had their “prelates,” too, and the African-American

churches, and even some local presbyteries have been ruled with an iron fist, ideologically and personally. The Lord preserve us from prelates!

The Downside: Churchiness

If doctrine and mission can be advanced gainfully by Episcopacy, but if prelacy can stalk it, there is a further chronic weakness in the Episcopal position. This is the tendency toward churchiness. Churchiness is a slight neurosis capable of captivating—enthralling and seducing—a tiny but measurable element in any population. These are a few people—maybe a thirtieth of any given demography—who love "church," who love to "do church." They are actively interested in pretty church buildings, liturgical services, vestments and miters, chantings and statues, stained glass and clergy jokes, and so on. Recently, an active Episcopal layman was expressing his frustration at the overwhelming enervation of an Episcopal diocesan meeting he had attended. "But you realize," he said, "there are actually people out there who like these things." I had to agree. To me and my friend, such meetings are more like a root canal! But evidently, incontrovertibly, there are people out there who think they're great.

The problem is, from the standpoint of doctrine and mission, such folk are a tiny slice of the pie. Really needy people are too troubled and self-absorbed to notice "churchy" things. They almost always end up being ministered to by the burgeoning neo-pentecostal congregations that now crowd every "middlesex, village, and field" in America. Really *needy* people don't count the candles. They just want help, lots of it. Really *serious* people, on the other hand, are impatient with churchiness that is reflexive and unreflective. They are "not fond of platitudes in stain'd glass attitudes" (W. S. Gilbert). Really serious people may find in the more churchy styles of Episcopalianism a transit-lounge to somewhere else, but they almost always end up as Roman Catholics. Or perhaps, today, Muslims!

Churchiness is the true bane of Episcopalian polity. The writer winces, for example, absolutely cringes, when people make great hay over the bishop's "hat" (i.e., the miter) when he comes to confirm. The "hat" seems to be a sort of quaint badge of identity, a kind of "old shoe" or sentimental mark of our identity. To me, however, it is the very last thing I wish to emphasize. It is in any event a piece of post-1979 "leisure suit" Episcopaliana, which was almost *never* worn by bishops prior to that time and reminds me of Roman Catholicism but without the *gravitas.* So jokes about "the hat" make me sink below the trestle.

The Downside: "911 Is No Joke"

There is a third besetting weakness that is attracted historically to Episcopacy. Fortunately, all the other polities, from separatist Baptist all the way across to Lutheran, have their *own* besetting weaknesses. But a third one for Episcopalians is an inability to bring discipline to bishops who go off theologically. It has proven impossible—and it has been tried in many, many instances—for Anglican Christians to curtail *episkopoi* who teach and preach contrary to the Bible. It proved impossible for the Anglican communion to proceed effectively against the tireless skeptic John William Colenso, bishop of Natal, South Africa, from 1853 to 1883. It proved impossible to suspend Bishop Richard Holloway of Edinburgh, an attacker in full bay of classic Christianity. And it has proved totally impossible to pronounce against the suave and aggressive Bishop John Spong of Newark, New Jersey. Why is this so?

Is it our susceptibility to the *Zeitgeist* of uncontested pluralism? That we certainly share with everyone else, and certainly the other mainline churches.

Is it our residue of "Englishness," which acts like the opposite of Shakespeare's "spleeny Lutherans?" Most bishops abhor conflict and are trained supposedly to "manage" it, not engage it. Moreover, in the United States, bishops are *elected* (i.e., not designated as in the Church of England). So they have to please the majority in order to get in.

Or is it the empty space on our altars, where the Bible used to be and ought now to be? Certainly many Episcopal churches once laid the Bible open on the Communion table. Few Episcopal clergy want to affirm Scripture as *the* rule of faith.

I can offer no sufficient explanation for the want of theological discipline among Episcopal bishops. The Archbishop of Canterbury himself cannot offer an explanation that satisfies. He would probably say his hands are tied, that his influence is purely moral. It is simply true that Anglicans/Episcopalians have rarely if ever been able to discipline its bishops when they stray from teaching and safeguarding the pure Word of God.

The bottom line for Episcopacy is that it is a *bene esse* feature of one great Christian family's life, the Anglican communion. In principle, and sometimes in practice, it has two important advantages: it puts the Word at the center of leadership and it can hasten and promote mission.

In practice, however, Episcopacy has three depleting demerits: it can succumb to prelacy, it is a magnet (*malgré lui*) for churchiness, and it seems unable to rein in its obvious cowboys.

Anglican Assets: The Ecclesia Permixta

Episcopacy is not the only asset, when it works right, that the Anglican way carries with it. Because the Virgin Queen ruled over a *mixed* church, even as her country was mixed (i.e., theological Protestants, theological Catholics, indifferentists, Church Puritans, and even "Church" Catholics, i.e., Roman Catholics who went to church the Anglican way in order to fit the legal requirement), the Church of England could never be a sect. It could never be a band of ultra- or "thorough" types. It had to accept the empirical diversity of human beings. It could not be a *perfectionist* church.

This is a very good thing. Perfectionist churches are a menace. They preach the law and not the gospel; they present a false and pastorally cruel version of Christian sanctification; and their teaching shipwrecks along the jagged shore of reality. "My karma ran over your dogma," says a bumper sticker. The criticism sticks if "your dogma" is a perfectionist variant of Christianity.

Perfectionism is also contrary to the spirit of the Pauline letters: "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ…. It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you" (1 Cor. 1:1–3; 5:1 NKJV). St. Paul understood the full implications of original sin. Christians are justified *and* they are sinners. That is the meaning of the Reformation phrase, *simul iustus et peccator,* which we can translate as "perfectly loved and also thoroughly human."

The correctly nonperfectionist ethos, the New Testament Pauline ethos, of Episcopalians is enduringly summarized in Article IX of the 39 Articles:

> Man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the Spirit. …And this infection of nature doth remain, yea in them that are regenerated.

The allergy to perfectionism is a "lucky thing" for Anglican origins. The

givens of Elizabethan England helped the church to codify its word or human nature in such a way that St. Paul's *ecclesia permixta* became a normal portrait of Christian community. Anglicanism at its best is far from being self-righteous. Or better, its charter documents strengthen the Bible's injunction against the wrong kind of judgments by which “men become as gods” (Gen. 3:4).

Tradition as Asset

In addition to its historical and also happily Pauline allergy to perfectionism, Anglicanism in its very origins, hence in its continuing DNA, values continuity. We esteem the virtue of tradition.

Tradition forms humility. Here is a working illustration of Anglican humility, which is neither sly nor hypocritical but is the real thing. Just two years ago a Church of England lay reader and his wife got their bishop's permission to start a church in a new public housing-estate (Americans would say, public-housing development) in a suburban area of London. This Anglican couple, who are also consciously evangelical, got approval to plant a church community along with Baptists and Methodists. This church “plant” attracted a small but hopeful band of Christians. But here's the thing: the Baptists said they could not in good conscience receive the Holy Communion in the form of wine. When an ordained Church of England clergyman was able to come, the Baptists would not receive the sacrament in the way the Anglicans did, no matter how “low-church” the Anglicans in fact were. (They were.)

So as not to bruise the three or four Baptists’ conscience, the Anglican couple in charge agreed to offer grape juice at Communion instead of wine. But the area bishop found out. He mandated wine, not grape juice. The bishop was within his rights.

What did our husband and wife missioners do? They could have told the bishop they would serve wine, but simply not done it: they could have continued to serve grape juice and simply kept their practice to themselves. They could have defied the bishop. But they are faithful members of the Church of England. What did they do? They deferred to their bishop. They went along with the bishop's direction. They served *wine* at Communion once a month and explained their decision, lovingly and thoughtfully, to their Baptist partners.

Well, it has gone fine. The Baptists do not communicate at that monthly service, but they still come every Sunday. The Baptists’ commitment has not changed. It has not softened. And the Anglican couple have bowed to authority

and given way. They have been like the centurion in the Bible, “a man under orders.” Such humility, striking in a day of entitlement and personal autonomies, is impressive. It moves me. It is a case in point for the right kind of Christian humility. I think it can be attributed to an “Anglican” style in respect to authority and tradition.

The importance of tradition in the shaping of Episcopal Christianity is high. A besetting weakness of popular Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism is the idea that the good news is new, that the gospel came to us just yesterday. We are the first to have believed. Now we all know that Christ comes to men and women in the present. Kierkegaard described Christ as “our Contemporary.” But we are not the first to have believed. Almost every conceivable human experience and also every species of renewal of trust in Christ has already taken place, somehow at some time before we were even born. We stand on the shoulders of millions and millions of people who came before.

Moreover, the facts of the gospel have been handed down. The events of salvation history took place during the Roman Empire, specifically under the prefecture of Pontius Pilate in Judea. Greater things will take place on the great and terrible day of the Lord. But our lives themselves are not salvific. They draw their significance theologically only from things that happened long ago *in re* (i.e., in fact), and will yet one day transpire, although they now exist *in spe* (i.e., in hope). You and I are links in the apostolic succession of an enormous passed-down truth. We are links; we are not ends in ourselves.

I want to claim that the Anglican tradition has a humble, high view of the Christian past. This *can* turn romantic and sentimental. It *can* transform itself easily (especially for Americans, who are chronically hungry for roots) into Anglophilia.[23] Our view of tradition can conveniently supercede true religion. I have lived with *ersatz* Anglicanism all my life. Yet there is at least one element of positive good in it: We did not make our religion up. The faith “once for all delivered to the saints” could never have gotten to us had it not been for our mothers and grandmothers and great-grandfathers. A high concept of tradition is able to nurture the humility of God's children, who groan, after all, in travail for our adoption as sons and daughters, the redemption of our bodies (Rom. 8:22–23).

Vertical, Not Horizontal

There is yet another asset to traditional Anglicanism. It is a precious one. It

is our inheritance of *vertical* worship. Our so-called “incomparable liturgy” focuses up, not out. A point of attraction, and especially to people coming from “free-church” Protestant Christianity, is that the prayer-book tradition at its best is not tied indissolubly to the personality and talent of the preacher. The gifts of the minister are important, but you still can have a good service, a mainly satisfying one, if the service is properly conducted from the Book, or at least the old Book!

People sometimes ask my wife and me, What should we do as Episcopalians if we move to a town where the local rector is awful? Mary and I say, Go to the early service of Holy Communion at the church. If the rector stays on the page—and clergy usually do for the early morning service—you will get something out of it. Your attention will be directed up. Then at nine or eleven o'clock, walk over to that expositing Presbyterian Church in America church or that warm United Methodist place down the street.

The Episcopal ethos, in its ideality, is vertical, not horizontal; transcendent, not bound by the “mixed” human relationships within any local Christian family; eternal, not transitory. These are high claims, I realize, but they are what worship is about. They are a real, not exaggerated positive of the Episcopal way.

The Three-Legged Stool

Before summing up the Anglican polity in its strengths and its weaknesses, there is one other important theme to state and weigh. It is the so-called Anglican hermeneutic or interpretive device of the “three-legged stool.”

Episcopalians speak today of something called the “three-legged stool,” the three “legs” of equal length being Scripture, tradition, and reason. Many will say that this is the means or interpretive device by which Anglicans judge what is true and good. I say “they” because not all Anglicans hold to this idea. The “three-legged stool” is a notion that has become axiomatic, if uncriticized, among mainstream American Anglicans.

Here is the idea. Here is how it is supposed to work. When we run into a proposal such as the “blessing of same-sex unions,” we run it by Scripture. If we cannot find grounds for it in Scripture, then we solicit tradition. If the idea does not square with tradition, then let's poll reason. Maybe we can find grounds for “same-sex unions” in science and the research of rational women and men. If good reasons for an action can be located either in the Word, or in the Christian past, or in reasonable evidence, then we have something. The “three legs” of

Scripture, tradition, and reason are of *equal* length. They are of equal weight and equal balance. Ideally, truth, so goes this argument of the “three-legged stool,” must match with the Bible, the legacy of the church, and the human mind. Or one of the three.

That portrayal of the three-legged stool is supposedly based on something that Richard Hooker said. He was the Elizabethan apologist for the Church of England against the Puritans. But he never said it the way it is now represented. And even if he had said it—which Hooker did not—in the way it is currently received, it would be at odds with the Articles of Religion and the original Prayer Book, not to mention the church's Bible.

What Anglicanism has held since the earliest Reformation period is that the Bible contains all things necessary to salvation, and nothing relating to the core relations of God and man that is not found in the Bible can ever be enforced, or even recommended, to believe. And definitely nothing that is ruled out or concretely negated in the Bible can be held or required to be held. Holy Scripture has always and everywhere been regarded as superior to tradition and superior to reason. This was, after all, our principal bone of contention against the Roman Church from the 1500s on. The Church of Rome had elevated the church's tradition over the clear evidence of Scripture. So we rejected the papacy, the cult of Mary, purgatory, relics, the sacrificial Mass in its teaching as a re-do of the “one full perfect and sufficient sacrifice satisfaction and oblation for the sins of the whole world,” and other wares in the Roman store as well. We rejected all those things because they were either contrary to the Bible or not to be found in the Bible. If something not found in Scripture but also not banned by Scripture had been handed down by the church's tradition, then it became a “thing indifferent,” an *adiaphora,* and therefore OK.

Similarly, if something emerged from human reason that was not contrary to or even included in the Bible, then we would be open to it. Thus evolution became a claim to which we had to listen, because the Bible's view of creation could be read in such a way as to allow for it. Richard Leakey showed this. Or air travel, or solar heating: you name others. But if Scripture pronounced explicitly and consistently against something which reason held, then we had to say no to it.

This is why, for example, Bible Christians who are Anglican will never be able to accept the “blessing of same-sex unions” and the ordination of active homosexual ministers. Such things are explicitly rejected in the Bible, and overwhelmingly. Because Scripture is superior to the other two “legs”—the

picture is sometimes offered of a tricycle, Bible being the big wheel in front, tradition and reason being the smaller wheels in back—the two shorter “legs,” alone or together, can never carry the day.

We have a three-pronged approach, yes, to the determining truth. But Scripture is light-years ahead of the other two. The story of the human race and the highest thought of the best and brightest minds are not sufficient to approach, can never come near the appeal and decisive imposing grandeur of the revelation of the Bible.

Summary

In short summary, the Episcopal position within the Christian family of churches attains an ideal of Bible doctrine and enterprising mission when the system of bishops runs according to its Reformation and prayer book source-lines. But Episcopacy evacuates into *power* when prelacy takes over, and it turns to *mush* when theological discipline proves impossible and when churchiness, hence distance from real life, is attracted to it.

Episcopacy is strong in its prayer book and Pauline understanding of human nature, its nonperfectionistic hold on *simul iustus et peccator.* Episcopacy is also able to cultivate an attractive and rare humility. Such a virtue is hinged to a benign view of the past and our continuity with it. The Christian past is buoying and strengthening for this polity. Anglicanism at its best—and this is really sometimes the case, in practice—is vertical in its worship, hence less dependent on personnel, both ordained and lay. You can receive something from almost any traditionally and sincerely undertaken service of this church.

Finally, the Episcopal or Anglican Church is open to human knowledge and to the caveats of church history. But they must *stand back* if Scripture's mighty Word from God speaks in opposition to them.

Coda: Back to the Future

There are two final, vital points to make in solidarity with this Episcopal “case.” The first point is substantial. The second is promissory.

Anglican-Episcopal reality is and often has been out of sync with its ideality. This means that it often functions out of accord with its first principles. It can be prelatical, and has been. It can be churchy and has definitely

succumbed to churchiness, especially when the church has been at pains to distinguish itself from other Protestant groups.

The Episcopal Church has at times been a bad church, pure and simple. It has overvalued its penultimates and taken for granted the Ultimate. It has even suffered some of its representatives to wipe their feet on its Ultimate. Actually, most Anglican bishops and leaders have been and are orthodox Christian leaders. The problem has seldom been heresy in the true theological sense—as it is, for example, definitely, in the case of Richard Holloway of Scotland. But the church has been too content with a certain style of Christianity-Lite. The trouble with Christianity-Lite is that it has a vacuum inside itself—it carries too little in its hold. Therefore, it has a subcutaneous susceptibility to whatever is being offered up from the culture that exists around the church. Anglican Christianity-Lite is able to fall victim to whatever comes at it. And there are any number of possibilities.

In the mid-nineteenth century, we fell victim too fast and too hard—like falling in love too quickly—to romanticism and Anglophilia. I mean the Oxford Movement as it came to the United States, without the counterweight of the old, Protestant Prayer Book theology and its conspicuously open Bible. In the 1970s, our old identity collided (softly—Listen to the Warm) with sentimental liturgical notions issuing from the Second Vatican Council (Have a Nice Day). Supposedly those had come from Hippolytus. In fact they came from the disco era! At the present juncture of history, Episcopal identity is an “easy touch” for the “gay lobby.” Tomorrow it will be something else. And “tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow” (*Macbeth*).

When our ideality rules, or at least predominates in leading influential sectors of the communion, we are safer. The point of this essay has been to affirm the ideality while being open-eyed about the true situation.

My second concluding point relates to hope. In the intersection of lovely ideals and historical givens, where is our hope? Where does my hope personally lie for the future, as an active and convinced Episcopalian Christian?

The simple answer is: Our hope is thee, O Lord, maker of heaven and earth. That has never not been true. But specifically or concretely, my hope rests in the coming of a great missionary leader. In actual fact, my hope is that God will raise up a new John Wesley!

It is a sophism of church history that the Anglican Church before John Wesley was rationalistic, ineffective, and soporific. That is probably not true, or at least not true in the way it has become axiomatic concerning eighteenth-

century Christianity. But, the church did need a shot in the arm. There is no question about that. The average woman and man did need a transforming Word that could be heard and felt and spread. Whether you believe in providence or not, Wesley was born and grew and fell flat on his face in Savannah and was converted in London. And his ministry, together with that of his old friend in holy orders, George Whitefield, changed the world. His gospel dynamism created a very different America from what the thirteen colonies would have been without him. England, too, was never the same. Wesley was a committed, articulate Anglican Christian (notwithstanding his very reasonable missionary frustration toward the end of his course, out of which he ordained two bishops for America). The point is: John Wesley was given to us. That is history and it is fact.

I hope for, and specifically pray for, a new John Wesley to reroute the ancient Anglican stream so as to be fed from its source: The Bible ministry of eternal Word and true feeding gospel sacraments. The best way is always back to the source, *ad fontes*, swallowing up the penultimates in a thrilling tidal wave of ultimates. The light of the sun always overpowers completely the lights of the moon. So it is, always also, with the Sonship of God. He is the only guarantor of the great and living apostolic succession, by which we are each bound to the center.

Responses to Paul F. M. Zahl's Episcopal Polity

Response by Robert L. Reymond

In my opinion, of the five essays in this volume, including my own, Paul Zahl's essay on Anglican polity is by far the most interesting “read.” He writes with a flair for the well-turned, attention-grabbing phrase, with a penchant for modernity, and with a refreshing candor about both the lateness and the weaknesses of his church's polity. But while I concur with him that church polity is not as significant as the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ's doing and dying, I would argue that it is still important as one aspect of our Lord's kingship over his church and that the evidence in Scripture for one particular form of church polity is not as “multiple” as Zahl implies that it is when he contends that he can argue from Scripture the Presbyterian position, the Baptist position in its several flavors, the Anglican/Lutheran position, the Congregational position, and others as well, adding, however: “But I can argue none of these positions in such a way that the logic becomes necessary or

binding. The New Testament evidence is simply too diverse."

Nor, he maintains, does church tradition aid us here because the witness of tradition, is "like all things human, diverse in the extreme." I wonder if the absence for him of any biblical perspicuity in this area of church polity is not simply an existential index into his own psyche. That is to say, because he realizes that the Episcopal polity of the Anglican Church with which he has cast his lot has no scriptural warrant, his unwillingness to believe that any other polity can be drawn from Scripture with any degree of convincing clarity or authority is to be traced to the fact that he unconsciously wants to bring down all of the efforts of those who argue for the scriptural character of a certain polity to his own overall lack of certainty about polity. In other words, I wonder if he is not being controlled by the sentiment: "Because I can't justify my position with any degree of certainty from the New Testament, I don't want anyone else to think that he can justify his from Scripture either."

I acknowledge that this is just a surmise on my part. But for whatever reason, we are left here in Zahl's essay not with a *biblical* study at all but with a phenomenological analysis of (1) Anglicanism's Episcopacy, (2) its *ecclesia permixta* character that prevents the Anglican church, he argues, from becoming perfectionistic (which is an empty fear if ever there was one), and (3) the value it places on its "prayer book" tradition that, he maintains, focuses worship vertically, not horizontally.

For this reason, of the five essays in this volume Zahl's essay for me is also the most disappointing. For I had really hoped that the contributor of the essay on Anglican polity would make a concerted effort to demonstrate the scriptural character of Anglican polity. But like Anglican apologists in general, Zahl realizes, I feel rather sure, that his form of church government cannot be found in the New Testament and therefore that any case for hierarchical Episcopacy (or for the value of Anglicanism in general) can only be made on pragmatic or utilitarian grounds. E. A. Litton (1813–1897), for example, acknowledged: "No order of Diocesan Bishops appears in the New Testament," but he then aborted the significance of this concession by adding:

> The evidence is in favor of the supposition that Episcopacy sprang from the Church itself, and by a natural process.…The Presbytery, when it assembled for consultation, would naturally elect a president to maintain order, first temporarily, but in time with permanent authority.…Thus it is probable that at an early period an informal episcopate had sprung up in each Church. As the Apostles were one by one removed…the office would

assume increased importance and become invested with greater power.[24]

Bishop J. B. Lightfoot, to whose article Zahl refers approvingly, also acknowledged that, while the Presbyterian system was the one that prevailed in the New Testament church, “the episcopate was created out of the presbytery” more as a thing of expediency than of divine right,[25] which means, of course, that the Episcopal polity of Anglicanism is simply not founded on Scripture. But Zahl himself is more candid than either Litton or Lightfoot, for he forthrightly acknowledges that “the polity of the Anglican communion is rooted—anchored—in particular historical circumstances governing and surrounding the events of the English Reformation, especially that phase of the Reformation that followed the accession of Queen Elizabeth in 1560,” and that Anglican polity is therefore a “wax nose” that can be shaped in almost any direction except that of Romanist polity.

Then, if one believes, as Zahl does, that church polity, as far as the New Testament is concerned, is simply one of the *adiaphora* of Scripture, that is, an “indifferent” matter, he can argue that the *esse* (“being”) view of church polity within Protestantism is an outgrowth of John Calvin's *inappropriate* “third use of the law.” Accordingly, when he asserts: “God's grace in the believer's heart inclines the person spontaneously, naturally, unselfconsciously toward the works of love. There is no need for a road map [or, in the context of this volume's topic, for a biblical church polity—RLR],” that is to say, Christians will automatically know, by the prompting of the Spirit dwelling within them, what they should do in every circumstance of life, including apparently matters of church government, one can only say, if this be true, that the Holy Spirit wasted a lot of ink and parchment after the doctrinal sections of the New Testament epistles when he inspired the writing apostles to spell out in great detail how the Christian is to live and how he is to behave in the house of God in light of his salvation. And one must wonder why there is so little consensus among Christians regarding church polity if the Holy Spirit will lead Christians spontaneously and naturally in this regard as he purportedly does in the other areas of the Christian life.

Nevertheless, Zahl argues on utilitarian grounds, in spite of its acknowledged late Elizabethan origin, that Anglican Episcopacy has a value and a beauty about it that has proven beneficial to the *well-being* (*bene esse*), not the *being* (*esse*), of the church in two specific areas, these benefits in turn apparently justifying in his thinking its continuing legitimacy: First, Episcopacy can guarantee and protect the church's gospel if the right men occupy the bishoprics;

and second, episcopacy can fuel the missionary spirit in the church if the right men become bishops. He may be right that an orthodox bishop can protect the gospel and fuel the church's missionary spirit but, acknowledging as he does that bishops within the Anglican church who “go off theologically,” such as Bishop John Spong of Newark, New Jersey,[26] are in actual practice beyond the reach of church discipline, he is quick to acknowledge that a theologically liberal bishop can become a *prelatical* “wolf in sheep's clothing” and with impunity can cool through a substituted “churchiness” the ardor and passion of the church for everything that is true, good, and beautiful. One might rejoin here, if he were mischievous, that an orthodox presbytery of the PCA could help immensely in this regard.

I wish I could share Zahl's enthusiasm for Anglicanism, but because it plays so fast and loose with biblical truth in so many areas of its existence—such as its toleration among its clergy of what it calls “seminal thinkers” who are really just radical unbelievers, its Anglo-Catholic sacerdotalism, its continuing overtures to Rome, and its endorsement of egalitarianism among its clergy, all of which for me are “bottom line,” nonnegotiable *Verboten*—it does not commend itself to me, and I in turn cannot commend Anglicanism to anyone else.

I thank Rev. Zahl for his essay. I say again how taken I was with its style, openness and candor, and scholarship. Perhaps we can interact again some time about this matter. I would enjoy that very much.

Response by Daniel L. Akin

Of all of the chapters in this book, including my own, none was more fun and entertaining to read than Paul Zahl's. What a wonderful wit he has! His transparent honesty was refreshing, though it was not always a plus in defending Episcopal/Anglican polity. Still, Paul says a number of things that make a helpful contribution to the issues raised in this book.

First, I appreciate his admission that he cannot sustain the Roman Catholic position. On biblical grounds this is self-evident. Romanists must always seek to build a historical defense, and even here the evidence is simply not there. Roman ecclesiology is totally absent from the New Testament.

Second, I found his discussion of the “third use of the law” fascinating, though not completely compelling. I am a believer in church discipline as an essential and necessary mark of the church. His discourse on “Elizabethan Givens” was likewise engaging, helping us see how Anglicans have arrived where they are. His analysis was thorough and fairly presented.

Third, Dr. Zahl acknowledges that “Anglicanism/ Episcopalianism is a phenomenon of Christian history.” This is clearly correct. It is not a phenomenon easily defended on biblical grounds.

Fourth, there is an implied affirmation of the priesthood of all believers when it is affirmed, “only Jesus himself is and is sufficient to be our High Priest. No human being is or can be a priest before God.” I do wish, however, that the biblical warrant for and the theological importance of this doctrinal truth were more clearly articulated.

Fifth, his challenge for bishops to be “servants of the Word” needs to be heeded in every generation, regardless of denominational affiliation. Wherever this divine mandate (see 2 Tim. 4:1–5) has been neglected, the fallout for the church has been devastating. Dr. Zahl effectively addresses this issue.

Sixth, Paul correctly notes Episcopacy's early missionary spirit (via John Wesley) as well as its unintended but very real weakness of prelacy. He accurately notes its (prelacy's) paralyzing presence in other circles (Baptists!) as well and pleads with our Lord to “preserve us from prelates!” I heartily “amen” his prayer.

Seventh, he notes Episcopacy's tendency toward “churchiness” and thus irrelevancy. Again, this is a word not to be reserved only for Anglicans.

Eighth, Paul again is transparently honest in pointing out Episcopacy's inability to discipline heretical bishops within its ranks. This to my mind has been its most glaring weakness. When the likes of John Shelby Spong go unpunished for their blatant heresy and blasphemous outrages, something is terribly wrong with that church's polity. Scripture is not being obeyed (cf. Titus 1:9). One would plead for some proposal to deal with this to, as Dr. Zahl puts it, “rein in its obvious cowboys.” Sadly, Dr. Zahl offers no such proposal.

As for the negative aspects of his chapter, the most serious is the absence of a careful and comprehensive analysis of Scripture. This is something I am sure the other contributors will note as well, and so I will not belabor the point. One must exegete the Holy Scriptures to gain God's mind on any and all issues. This includes ecclesiology and church polity. It begs the question to say, there “has been the fluidity, even the multiplicity of the evidence concerning the ‘church’ in the New Testament” and that “the New Testament evidence is simply too diverse. There is no one governing New Testament ecclesiology,” and then offer no evidence. The evidence must form our conclusion, it cannot be the other way around.

Second, to assert that recent interest in ecclesiology in American Protestantism "suggests complacency regarding the ultimate issues.…It may be a measure of the 'success' of American Christianity as a whole, at least in terms of numbers and financial supply…" is special pleading. Might it not rather suggest a "back to the Bible movement" that has awakened to the secular encroachments that have crept into the church to her harm? For many of us the issue is the truth of God's Word, whatever the issue might be.

Third, Paul's lack of interaction with the text of Scripture as it relates to church discipline is a serious flaw that leaves the door open for both moral and theological lapse. Paul recognizes this, in part, and rightly laments Anglicanism's inability to stave off doctrinal heresy. He does not, however, provide a solution to this deadly dilemma, as noted above.

Fourth, his declaration that Anglicanism has "Calvinist articles, a popish liturgy, and Arminian clergy" is most likely correct. To say this arrangement "has real virtue" is most certainly incorrect. It is more of a formula for chaos and confusion. It leads to clergy who deny their own statement of faith, and at points the cardinal doctrines of Christianity.

Fifth, arguing that "bishops on any reading embody the continuity of the church, as well as its unity" certainly needs a biblical defense of some measure. Unfortunately Dr. Zahl does not provide one. This is not surprising, however, as this is not the witness of Scripture. The continuity of the church and its unity is rooted in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, and it is the responsibility of the body of Christ and all her members to maintain this. Elders/bishops certainly should take the lead by virtue of their office, but the congregation as a whole is equally charged (see Gal. 1:5–10 as one example).

Sixth, Dr. Zahl rightly argues against "a perfectionist church" but overstates the case. Our Lord Himself challenged us to strive for perfection as the goal of our love for the heavenly Father (Matt. 5:48). A perfect church will not be achieved prior to the eschaton, but a pure church reaching after perfection theologically, morally, and in its ministries is certainly on God's agenda for his children. An "allergy to perfectionism" should not devolve into an "allergy to sound doctrine, godliness and holiness."

Seventh, and epistemologically problematic, is episcopacy's three-legged stool of Scripture, tradition, and reason. This is a broken stool that cannot stand. Thankfully, Paul challenges this epistemology as wrong-headed and inadequate to safely guide the church in matters of faith and practice. It would be a significant advance if Paul's Episcopal brothers and sisters would follow his lead

on this. It could even spark revival in their midst.

Paul closes his chapter by appealing to our God to raise up “a new John Wesley to reroute the ancient Anglican stream so as to be fed from its source: The Bible ministry of eternal Word and true feeding gospel sacrament.” This is a wonderful and God-honoring prayer, but I appeal to Paul not to pray so selfishly! Pray for us too! Pray that God would do the same for us all, for we too need a fresh touch from our God.

Response by James R. White

I appreciated the at-times almost brutal honesty with which Dr. Zahl spoke of his own communion and its history, trials, and tribulations. Many of the concerns I have had over modern Anglican polity and practice are mirrored in this essay.

Of course, it is difficult to respond to this presentation, for it begins with the confident assertion of the denial of the very foundation of my own ecclesiology. That is, Dr. Zahl begins by asserting that the New Testament truly does not present a discernable, identifiable ecclesiology. He writes:

> Church questions are penultimate ones in the Bible. They are penultimate in the Bible because the evidence in Scripture is multiple, not necessary, and therefore universalizable. Anyone who argues in favor of the universality of a particular New Testament polity will always have to devalue or deemphasize one or another conflicting text.

By the term “multiple” I assume what is meant is expressed in the next paragraph where we read that Dr. Zahl would be able to argue from Scripture “a Presbyterian position; a Baptist position, in several flavors; a more or less Anglican/Lutheran position (whatever that means exactly); and certainly a Congregational/ Independent position. I can argue all these positions, and others, too.” In other words, as he then states, “the Bible makes it impossible for anyone to be authoritative on this point.” This is a direct denial of the foundational assertion that underlies the presentations made by myself and Dr. Reymond, that of the perspicuity and capacity of the Scriptures to explain to us the form of the church that pleases God. It is very difficult for me to believe that he who ordained the incarnation, the atonement, the resurrection, and the establishment of the church, would then leave that church without clear and divine direction as to his will concerning her officers and her worship.

When the apostle Paul wrote to Titus regarding his duties in ministry on the island of Crete, he included these words: “The reason I left you in Crete was that

you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you" (Titus 1:5). If, in fact, Titus fulfilled the will of the apostle (I think it fair to assume he did), then he was seeking to "set in order what remains" in the churches established through the missionary proclamation of the church. We must assume, then, that there was an order to the church, that the apostle made the details of this order known to men like Titus and Timothy, and that they then had a clear idea of what the apostle had in mind when he wrote to them. Part and parcel of this work included, in the above cited text, the appointment of elders in every city, just as Paul had appointed elders in Ephesus, and Philippi as well (though in that case, he refers to them as bishops, *episkopoi*).

Is the Bible really unclear on this matter? Or is there not a pancanonical, consistent presentation of the order of the church that provides us with a sufficient basis upon which to know the mind of Christ for his church? I surely believe the Word does provide to us a clear enough revelation so that we are not left with such a "multiple" view of the form of the church as has been suggested by Dr. Zahl.

It strikes me that the old time Anglicans did not adopt this viewpoint that the Bible makes it "impossible" to make an "authoritative" statement on the form as church government as their own. That is, the Episcopal form of church government was defended as being apostolic and biblical, not merely as one option among many, to be presented, and chosen, on the basis of predilection or taste rather than revelation.

When the outlines of the Episcopal view were presented, no interaction with the fact that the term appears in the plural *within the context of the local church* (Phil. 1:1) was presented. The fact that *presbuteros* and *episkopos* are used interchangeably is not addressed, either. These facts are strongly opposed to the concept of a monarchical Episcopate (a single-bishop concept that included as part of its substance the differentiation of, and subject of, the presbyters to the bishops), despite the early appearance of this viewpoint in church history. It is interesting to note that historically, even after the monarchical episcopate had become firmly established in practice, Jerome recognized that it was a practice of custom, not of scriptural warrant. He wrote:

> A presbyter, therefore, is the same as a bishop, and before dissensions were introduced into religion by the instigation of the devil, and it was said among the peoples, "I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, and I of Cephas," Churches were governed by a common council of presbyters; afterwards,

> when everyone thought that those whom he had baptised were his own, and not Christ's, it was decreed in the whole world that one chosen out of the presbyters should be placed over the rest, and to whom all care of the Church should belong, that the seeds of schisms might be plucked up.… Therefore, as we have shown, among the ancients presbyters were the same as bishops; but by degrees, that the plants of dissension might be rooted up, all responsibility was transferred to one person. Therefore, as the presbyters know that it is by the custom of the Church that they are to be subject to him who is placed over them so let the bishops know that they are above presbyters rather by custom than by Divine appointment (*Commentariorum In Epistolam Ad Titum*, PL 26:562–563.)

The biblical fact that *presbyters* and *bishops* are in fact interchangeable terms in the New Testament, and that the local bodies of believers had a *plurality* of elders are facts that stand firmly opposed to any system that would advocate rulership by a single bishop.

Response by James Leo Garrett, Jr.

I agree with Dr. Zahl that various Christians do seek a church order or structure that is "universalizable." But the question is, Which order is actually more universalizable and which is more valuable when universalized?

Dr. Zahl is quite sure that "any period of Christian history for which ecclesiology and polity are the driving issues is decadent by definition," because polity is per se a lesser issue. Dr. Zahl seems to celebrate the Puritan era, noting how many Puritans remained in the Church of England, but by his own definition that era must be reckoned as "decadent" or "a time of comparative *stasis.*" The doctrine of the church, according to Millard J. Erickson, has never been treated as completely as other doctrines throughout Christian history,[27] but some have concluded that, chiefly because of the ecumenical movement, ecclesiology was given major attention during the twentieth century.[28] Moreover, Dr. Zahl is not clear as to the proper relationship between polity and ecclesiology. At times they seem to be distinct and again to be virtually synonyms. I would insist that ecclesiology is much more comprehensive than and includes polity.[29] It is surely an indicator of Anglican-Baptist differences that Baptists in the past and now reckon ecclesiology as something more than a second-rank doctrine.[30]

It is easy to agree with Dr. Zahl that Episcopal polity is not the *esse* of the church because it cannot be sustained from the New Testament. Even so he and I

both know that there are Anglo-Catholics in his communion that defend the *esse* view, thus invalidating the ministry of every Baptist pastor in the world. In his defense of the *bene esse* view he is aware, as am I, that there are Landmark Baptists who deny that any church which does not practice believer's baptism is to be reckoned a true church.

Dr. Zahl is quite instructive as to how William Laud and his fellow Anglicans substituted Episcopal polity for the Puritan insistence on church discipline as an expression of the Reformers' third use of the law. But Dr. Zahl, who claims to "affirm," "commend," and "defend" Episcopal polity, actually has major problems with the threefold order of ministry. He is unhappy that some deacons are becoming permanent deacons. He is insistent that "presbyter" is often misconstrued as "priest." He laments that bishops, who ought to be guardians of the Bible and the sacraments and to fuel the church's mission, have been weakened by "prelacy" (authoritative personal rule by one man), by "churchiness," and by the inability to discipline heretical bishops.

In explicating and defending the Anglican communion as a "mixed" church, Dr. Zahl contrasts sharply a "mixed" church with a "perfectionist" church. In doing so he confuses the gathered and disciplined believers' church[31] with a "perfectionist" church, thereby ignoring or disregarding the doctrine of sanctification among believers' churches.

Tradition can indeed be an asset, especially to balance exclusivistic contemporaneity, but Dr. Zahl seems to equate tradition with submission to the authority of bishops. For Irenaeus and Tertullian tradition embraced "the rule of faith" (Apostles' Creed) as well as recognition of the teaching authority of bishops who served in churches founded by apostles. To appreciate tradition in the sense of basic Christian doctrine, one does not have to have "apostolic" (i.e., Episcopal) succession.

Dr. Zahl's advocacy of Anglican worship as "vertical" is based on two factors: it is "not tied…to the personality and talent of the preacher" or his gifts, and it is "not bound by…human relationships within any local Christian family." Dr. Zahl is possibly not aware that in many nonliturgical churches there has been a significant reclaiming of the vertical or Godward dimension of worship. Nor should the relationships within a local or particular congregation be ignored as one assesses worship (Matt. 5:23–24; Acts 2:42–47).

Dr. Zahl has a problem with "the three-legged stool" (Scripture, tradition, and reason), allegedly derived from Richard Hooker, a major defender of Anglican polity, when the three legs are said to be "of *equal* length" and

therefore “of equal weight and equal balance.” For Zahl, the stool displaces the supreme authority of the Scriptures, thus making for disputes over same-sex unions and ordination of active homosexuals as ministers. But is not the three-legged stool the source for Episcopal polity, especially since Dr. Zahl has declared, “There is no one governing New Testament ecclesiology”?

Surely other denominations, not solely Anglicans-Episcopalians, need to confess in all humility that in matters of polity “reality is and often has been out of sync with its ideality.” Not only has there been the mixture of polities that are confessedly Christian, but also there has been the wedding of church ministries and structures to non-Christian value systems and ideologies. Furthermore, we can affirm Dr. Zahl's yearning for other Anglicans like John Wesley.

Finally, because Dr. Zahl finds nothing normative for church polity in the New Testament, I must acknowledge with some sadness that I am not required, in order to respond to his very interesting chapter, to deal with any specific passage in the New Testament.

CHAPTER 5

The Plural-Elder-Led Church

Sufficient as Established—
The Plurality of Elders as Christ's
Ordained Means of Church Governance

JAMES R. WHITE

Introduction

The church of Jesus Christ is a divinely ordained institution, gifted by God to function as he wills. His promise to build his church, and the amazing fact that he has chosen to demonstrate his manifold wisdom “to the rulers and authorities in heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10 NASB) through the church, provides a compelling reason to believe that his design of the church itself is just as eternal, just as divinely wise, and just as clearly revealed.

Those who embrace the divine truths announced and defended in the Protestant Reformation, and especially the formal principle of the Reformation, *sola scriptura*, come to the subject of the governance of the church with a mandate that flows from their dedication to the sufficiency of the inspired Word. Our understanding of the nature, mission, purpose, commission, and form of the church must first and foremost come from the careful, consistent exegesis of the Word of God. The need to bring forth the truths of the Scriptures about the church anew in each generation is not a mere reinvention of the wheel, so to speak, but instead reflects the need for a passionate love for Christ's church and the necessary conviction that comes only from hearing anew the mandates of God's Word.

Sola scriptura teaches us that the Scriptures are the sole infallible rule of faith for the church. This is due, primarily, to their nature as God-breathed revelation. The Scriptures provide to the church the very voice of her Lord, speaking to each generation with divine power and ever-new urgency. The

church does not desire to hear any other voices but that of her Lord. It follows inevitably that she desires to order herself—her form, her mission, her worship, her offices—in accordance with Christ's will, revealed in the Scriptures. Traditions, no matter how long held or deeply cherished, cannot take the place of the living voice of Christ commanding his church and ordering it in such a way as to glorify him.

Of course, everyone embraces “tradition” at some level, and the key issue is our willingness and ability to examine those traditions in the light of Scripture. This is certainly true when it comes to the historic debates over the proper form of church governance. Churches and denominations, by nature, have strong and long-lasting commitments to certain traditions regarding the form the church is to take, both in her local manifestations and in any hierarchical structure. Often these traditions have become enshrined in confessions of faith, conciliar documents, or creeds. In those traditions where an ecclesiastical structure is inherent, long-lasting institutions may exist with venerable histories. But the mere existence of these long-held traditions cannot, for those who believe in *sola scriptura*, substantiate practices and beliefs that are not founded in the bedrock of the church's charter, the Word of God. As “comforting” as old beliefs and traditions may be, our dedication to the authority of God speaking in Scripture must take preeminence.

Each of those presenting their view of church governance in this volume will, surely, assert that the system they propound is thoroughly biblical in nature, and there can be little doubt as to the sincerity of each writer's belief on that point. The reader will have to decide, however, how consistently each writer applies that term *biblical*. Indeed, some perspectives see the application of *sola scriptura* in a less stringent fashion, leaving much greater possibility of extended reflection upon basic biblical truths, with the result that “implications” are given more weight than in other views. Some may believe that while the New Testament provides a basic framework, there is a need for expansion and establishment of other structures beyond that explicitly authorized by the apostolic writings. It is the view of this presentation that the structure of the church is so clearly seen, and its offices so plainly taught in the inspired Scriptures, that to go beyond their warrant is in essence to seek to improve upon the divine wisdom, something man surely cannot do.

Christ the Lord of the Body

The fact that each writer in this work has taken the time to enunciate his understanding of the proper form of church government speaks to the shared commitment to the truth that Christ is the Lord of the church and hence has the right—no, the duty—to order the church under his lordship so as to bring honor and glory to God. While this may seem a given, in today's ecclesiastical climate, it is a truth that needs to be stated forcefully. Many people in today's church believe the form, mission, and worship of the church are pliable, undefined entities that are best determined on the basis of surveys and pragmatic "results." The idea that there is a divine blueprint, a heaven-sent mandate regarding the form of the church is not as widespread today as it was not so very long ago. And the idea that God's worship is circumscribed by his own revealed will, and that we are not free to simply do "what feels good" and call it worship, is even less popular.

The lordship of Christ over his church, however, is also what makes this discussion profitable. If we lacked confidence in Christ's rulership over the church, we would have no reason to believe he has given us sufficient guidance in his Word upon which to make decisions regarding the activity and function of the church. Christ is concerned with the daily work of his body, and this includes how the church goes about her mission in the world so as to bring glory to God the Father. His exercise of divine power and authority in saving his people is only one aspect of his lordship: He continues to function as Lord over the gathered body of the redeemed, the church. And just as Christ will not save one person in one way, another in a completely different way (there is only one gospel), so too the exercise of his lordship brings order and consistency to the expression of his church in the local bodies. It is not his intention that his church be a mass of confusion, but instead be an orderly, organized entity with a specific purpose and intention. We can then confidently address this topic, certain that Christ is pleased when his people strive to understand his will for his body, the church.

Christ's Plan for His Church Provides Her with All She Needs

Christ promised the perpetuity of his church and his own abiding presence with her "until the end of the age" (Matt. 16:18; 28:20 NASB). Yet the foundation of the church has been laid once, not to be laid over and over and over again (Eph. 2:20). Christ does not refound his church with each passing

generation, starting from scratch. It is a building process, but it is an ongoing one. Therefore, we can conclude that Christ has gifted the church with all that she needs to pursue her ministry, and this gifting is done within the context of how the Lord established his church from the beginning.

It is a vital part of the position presented in this essay that the form of the local church, made up of elders and deacons, is not only God's intention for the church, but that in the giving of these offices, the church is given everything she needs to accomplish what God intends for her to accomplish in this world. The giving to her of elders as undershepherds of the flock, each bringing requisite gifts, and together providing the necessary guidance, insight, and proclamation of God's truth needed in the local body, is a gift of his grace. The gathered elders are given the responsibility to “take care of the church of God” (1 Tim. 3:5 NASB), and believers are commanded to obey and submit to them (Heb. 13:17), so they must as a group possess the abilities and gifts to complete these tasks. With the deacons, who care for the widows and orphans and the material needs represented in the congregation, the officers of the church are capable of providing, through the gifting of the Spirit within them, for all which is necessary for the church to function as the “pillar and foundation of the truth” wherever the local congregation is planted.

If this were not the case, then we would expect to find clear and compelling biblical warrant for the provision of those offices and structures, beyond the elders and deacons of the local church, that are necessary for the church to be what Christ intends her to be. Much of the discussion will focus upon this very point. But surely all will agree that the exercise of Christ's lordship over his church would bring into existence, from the very founding of the local churches, that which is needed for her to be what he intends her to be. And this we believe he did in having the apostles appoint elders for them in every city (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). Once the elders are established, they can oversee the establishment of the diaconate, and when these things are in place, the church is ready to do what her Lord asks of her.

Self-Sufficiency (Autonomy/Independence)

Most presentations on the subject of church governance, the officers of the church, and the local church's relationship to other churches begin with a discussion of the offices in the local assembly itself. But there is value in approaching the subject first from the standpoint of the relationship of the local

assemblies to one another, and then moving to the offices themselves. The value is seen when we establish the independence of the local bodies in the sense of being self-governing entities gifted by God with those offices he deems sufficient to his plan. If the local churches are seen to function independently, then it follows that the offices established by God in those churches are sufficient, in and of themselves. If the local bodies are seen to be subordinated by the apostles to a higher ecclesiastical structure, then it follows that the offices in the local church are insufficient in and of themselves to function without that hierarchy.

The terms that have historically been used to describe the “autonomy” or “independence” of the local church often carry with them undesirable theological “baggage.” That is, when one speaks of the “autonomous local church,” the idea that is often conveyed is not “a body that by God's design has been given all that is needed to function to the honor and glory of God” but instead “a private club that has nothing to do with anyone else.” This is the unfortunate misperception attached to the terms “autonomous” or “independent,” and surely it must be confessed that at times the concept has come to mean, in the way it has been lived out, that very thing. The proper existence of local bodies under the guidance of a plurality of elders can lead to an imbalanced “aloneness” on the part of such fellowships. But any truth is liable to misuse and abuse. Such is not an argument against the thesis that the Scriptures do in fact show us locally autonomous congregations functioning directly under the headship of Christ, his rule expressing itself through the preaching of the Word, the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the divinely instituted guidance of the elders.

Two important concepts should be understood when considering the assertion that the local church is a unit unto itself: first, this is not a denial of the propriety of cooperation between local bodies in the furtherance of godly goals and causes, and second, that the assertion of autonomy is just the positive expression of a more easily examined negative proposition, that being that there is no God-established hierarchical structure above the local church.

In reference to the first statement, there is no reason to deny the proper cooperation of local bodies together in the work of the kingdom while at the same time insisting that there is no divinely ordained structure above the elders of the local church. If the elders of one local body feel it proper to cooperate with like-minded fellowships in their area to respond to a particular need, that is surely within their right to do so. To say that the highest ecclesiastical authority established by Christ is found in the elders of the local body is not tantamount to

insisting we must all exist in isolation from one another in all things. The point has to do with the proper functions of the eldership within the body, and the fact that the elders of one local body are not to be placed under the authority of a single person or group of persons in some other locale.[1]

In reference to the second point, the positive assertion of the autonomy of the local body is normally made within the context of denying the propriety of some structure, whether simple or complex, existing above the local church and its eldership. Likewise, those arguments for such structures, even if they do not explicitly state it, must argue that the local church has not been given sufficient gifts within those called as elders and deacons to meet the needs of the saints. Somehow, the necessity of this greater organization must be established. Merely stating pragmatic benefits to such an organization cannot suffice. We are speaking here of the divine intention and the means by which Christ's lordship over his church is exercised. This will become clear as the various positions interact with one another.

Biblical Testimony to the Sufficiency of the Local Church

There is truly little argument that the vast majority of references in the Bible to the *ekklesia*, the church, are specific references to local congregations. Dispute exists over certain passages, but in an easy majority of instances the specific local body to which the term refers is discernable in the context of its usage. The church comes to expression in visible, discernable local bodies of believers where the Word of God is preached and honored, obedience is shown to Christ's command to baptize and “proclaim the Lord's death until He comes” (1 Cor. 11:26 NASB) through the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the offices of the church are established and functioning, and discipline is exercised in accordance with divine command (1 Cor. 5). What evidence is there that this is the biblical norm? There is much to consider. Let us begin with some overarching considerations, and then focus upon particular biblical passages.

The Epistles of Paul

The epistles of the apostle Paul speak strongly to the communion, but independence, of the local churches. The majority of his letters are written to concrete, locatable, identifiable local churches, some of which he himself founded, some he did not. Most are to singular churches, though the Epistle to the Galatians is addressed to all the churches in a particular region, and there is

some evidence that Ephesians was likewise intended to be a “circular letter,” to be read throughout the churches in a general region.[2]

Surely the churches Paul addressed were under his apostolic authority. Of this there is no question. The apostles set men apart as elders and possessed a primary authority over the church derived directly from Jesus Christ. But unless someone is going to claim to possess that unique authority today, we find no other overarching authority that is established by the apostles to rule over the churches as a whole.[3] This is seen negatively in the lack of any reference to an ecclesiastical structure existing above the elders of the churches. Surely if such structures existed there would not only be passing reference to them, but regular references in light of the many and varied issues faced by the church in matters of doctrine, practice, and discipline. No literature exists where Paul is addressing such a structure and correcting the persons responsible for allowing the problems that existed in Corinth, for example, to crop up. In fact, when Paul does address issues of theological concern in warning about the arrival of future false teachers, he does so directly to the elders of the church at Ephesus, not to an Episcopal-style body above the local church (Acts 20:17).

There is no evidence that the church at Ephesus, for example, exercised any direct jurisdictional control over the church at Corinth, or Philippi. Nor do we have any reason to believe that elders from Ephesus were removed from their direct responsibilities and elevated to a higher position of oversight of other churches. Instead, the apostolic epistles exhort the churches as churches and not in the context of any overarching ecclesiastical body. Indeed, one would veritably expect entire epistles addressed to the “presbytery of southern Achaia” or “the archbishop of Greece.” But none exists, for these structures were very much yet in the future, and they cannot claim, we believe, apostolic warrant for their existence.

Matthew 18 and the Church

There is, of course, very little discussion of the church in the Gospels. The Lord Jesus is recorded as having said only a few words on the topic, but there is one major exception found in the midst of Matthew's Gospel. There we have Jesus' words:

> If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church;

> and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst (Matt. 18:15–20 NASB).

The context is providing general instructions for a future time, but the passage's importance is surely seen in the fact that believers are commanded to take a matter of personal sin regarding a fellow believer (a "brother") "to the church." This is the gathered church (v. 20), and clearly the church that becomes involved in the issue is not a church far away, but that to which both parties would be accountable. There are three discernable steps: personal and private discussion; establishment of the case by two or three witnesses; and finally reporting to the church. The church then speaks to the party, and if that person will not listen to the church, he is treated "as a Gentile and a tax collector." This power of the church is ultimately based upon the fact that the gathered church is the body of Christ, and he meets with his people (v. 20). This explains verses 18–19.

These verses are not investing nigh unto divine power in the church but are instead promising complete harmony between the actions of the Christ-indwelt church and the divine will (the church's actions reflecting the heavenly reality). There is no court of higher appeal, and it seems clear that for the church to speak with authority and wisdom in such a situation, those involved must be known to the church. In other words, we see here the same local, gathered body of believers that form the background of 1 Timothy 3:15, where the church is called the "pillar and foundation of the truth." The context of that passage is the local church as well. While some people balk at seeing such high words applied to local bodies, this is the most basic and consistent reading of the text itself.

The Churches of Revelation 1–3

Although we cannot discern with finality the order of the writing of the New Testament books, surely the Revelation given to John is one of the last, if not *the* last to be given by the inspiring work of the Holy Spirit. At the very least the first three chapters present to us a very clearly historical situation, with established, functional churches in view.

The seven churches that are addressed by the Lord of the church are local,

independent congregations. Note the words of John: “Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a son of man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash” (Rev. 1:12–13 NASB). Here the Lord Jesus is seen standing “in the middle” of the lampstands, among them. We do not see here a single lampstand with seven candles, but seven distinct, independent lampstands, with the Lord of the churches able to move about among them (Rev. 2:1). These individual lampstands can be removed (Rev. 2:5) without the removal of the others, again showing their independence and autonomy.

Consider as well the content of these letters to the churches (plural). There is no hint offered that the other churches should have been involved in the disciplinary or doctrinal issues present in any particular church being addressed. The church at Thyatira is not encouraged to engage in oversight of Sardis, or vice versa. The “Asian presbytery” is not faulted for allowing all these problems to develop in the region, nor is the “bishop of Ephesus” (the chief city in the region) held accountable for what happened in “lesser churches” that would, on a theory of prelacy, be under his oversight and control. Each church is spoken to as a unit, a whole. And when the Lord indicates he is going to come in judgment against a church, he does not indicate that this judgment will come through the actions of the other churches in some form of hierarchy or even council. Each church is addressed on its own merits, on its own grounds, as a body.

Hence, toward the close of the apostolic age, the churches seen in the Book of Revelation are functioning as independent units, directly accountable to the Lord of the church, who deals with them directly. Their autonomy and independence is clearly seen, their direct responsibility to, and subjection to, the lordship of Christ is equally clear. And no evidence exists that a hierarchical structure existed to which they gave their fealty and obedience. It follows, then, that these churches, organized by the apostle Paul or his companions, led by such apostolically trained men as Timothy, functioning with elders and deacons, present the mature, completed paradigm upon which the church is to exist after the apostolic age.

Objections Considered

Most would agree that the majority of references to the church in the New Testament are, in fact, to local assemblies, gathered for the common purpose of

worship and service to God, under the guidance of a plurality of elders. But it might be argued that this is due mainly to the situations to which the apostles addressed themselves than to anything else, and that these local churches could have been under the direction of a higher ecclesiastical structure without explicit delineation of the nature of that structure. Most often it is argued that the Jerusalem council of Acts 15 is the paradigm, for here the local churches were subjected to the “decrees” of the “apostles and elders” of the church at Jerusalem. Many see in this the beginning of some form of hierarchy, though the specifics of the actions and existence of the Jerusalem council and how they are relevant today differ from tradition to tradition.

In any case, the strongest argument that can be mounted, from the biblical text at any rate, focuses upon this unique gathering. First we will consider the idea that the Jerusalem council is to be seen as a foundation, a paradigm, for an ecclesiastical hierarchy, and second we will look at the phrase “apostles and elders” to see if in fact this reference leads us to believe that there is a continuing authority above the eldership of the local church.

The Jerusalem council was, in fact, a meeting between representatives of two major churches: Jerusalem and Antioch. It was also apostolic in nature (and hence nonrepeatable). Even though the focus of Luke's early history of the church shifts away from Jerusalem to the expansion of the faith through the church's missionary enterprise, it is clear that Jerusalem remained a very important church. It seems just as clear that its importance derived from those who were a part of the fellowship, for the eldership of this church is almost always referred to as being accompanied by “apostles.” The presence of James, the half brother of Jesus, and the location of the church in the heart of the Holy City itself, could not help but make the church located there unique, both geographically and historically. Of course, the apostles would not remain in the church forever, but in the early period, especially during the time when the churches in the rest of the world were still being planted, the first, primary church in Jerusalem would, by definition, take a place of leadership.

The topic that prompted the “Jerusalem council” was central to the nascent missionary enterprise of the church: how was the “Gentile situation” to be handled? In hindsight the answer may seem obvious, but in light of the miraculous work God had to do to get even Peter into a Gentile household to preach the gospel (Acts 10–11), it was not an easy issue in that day. But the Jerusalem council came on the heels of God's miraculous working with both Peter and Paul so as to give clear direction on the matter of how the gospel was to be preached and lived.

There is also the simple matter that this council claimed direct and divine inspiration for its teachings (connected, of course, to the presence of the apostles in her midst). The letter that is sent to the churches includes these observations: “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell” (Acts 15:28–29 NASB).

The invocation of the leadership of the Holy Spirit upon the council is not merely a matter of dressing a human decision in spiritual tones. The apostles believed their conclusion on the matter of the relationship of Jews and Gentiles to be Spirit-led.

But does the fact that two ancient churches, both represented by apostles, met to work through a difficult issue, provide a foundation for a continuing ecclesiastical body that exists above the local churches themselves? We cannot see how. The very uniqueness of the situation, historically, doctrinally, and in reference to the presence of apostles, precludes its extension into a warrant for an entire structure unknown elsewhere in Scripture. Surely the apostle Paul, present for the council, would have made direct reference to it in the pastoral Epistles if there had flowed from it the creation of an overarching ecclesiastical structure of some kind. But no such references exist.

Many of the same considerations are relevant to the phrase “apostles and elders.” While it is very true that this particular conjugation of offices took on a special meaning in the church at Jerusalem, it is just as true that this was a unique situation that ended shortly thereafter. There could not, by definition, be a continuation or expansion of this unique group. The church had to begin somewhere, and there had to be a period of time during which apostles interacted with elders; there also had to be a “mother church” for the church had to have a point of origin. But note that outside of the central issue of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church on the very same grounds as Jews (faith and faith alone), and a basic means of avoiding unnecessary offence, Jerusalem did not exercise any kind of oversight over the other churches.[4] Instead, she is the object of the support of other churches, and at the end of the recorded history of the New Testament, the churches of Revelation show no fealty to Jerusalem's headship: indeed, Jerusalem wanes in influence throughout the early centuries of church history.[5]

The two elements of this question then (the council and the phrase “apostles

and elders") both partake of the same historical uniqueness associated with the events of the founding of the church and the apostles of the Lord. The once-for-allness of the situation that engendered the council of Acts 15 and the role of the "apostles and elders" of the church at Jerusalem had to be kept in mind when considering their relevance as a foundation for an ongoing ecclesiastical structure.

Should it be argued, however, that the decisions of the Jerusalem council were, in fact, seen as binding upon the local churches, and that this gives warrant for the creation of decrees by ecclesiastical structures that become binding upon the local churches, subsuming the eldership under the control of other bodies, the fact of the historical situation must again be noted. The decision of the council carried apostolic weight (both Antioch and Jerusalem were represented by apostles), and no one is arguing that the apostles did not comprise an authority above the eldership of a local church as long as they acted in their capacity as apostles of Christ.[6]

Another objection might be founded upon the assertion of the apostle Paul that God has given certain gifts to "the church," and since each local body does not possess all the gifts mentioned, the local body cannot be sufficient unto itself. Paul writes, "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:11–13 NASB).

We will have reason to note this passage again when establishing the normative nature of the plurality of elders. For now, some have suggested that the wider range of offices here mentioned, going beyond elders and deacons, indicates a wider ecclesiastical structure that contradicts the sufficiency of local assembly. Without going into the great amount of literature and debate that has taken place over the meaning of such terms as "prophets," we can respond to the entire citation by noting that the gifting of God here revealed is in reference to the entire body of Christ upon earth, and that in a historical situation ("He *gave*"). It does not even suggest that an office of "apostle" is normative in the local assembly, nor that such an office would be perpetuated. The point of the apostle is that God intends to equip the saints and build up the body of Christ, and all that is needed for the church to do so is a gift of God, given from his hand.

The real question is, Do we believe that Paul is here enunciating formal offices that are to be perpetuated in an organization that exists above and beyond the local assemblies? Or should we simply see that just as the church as a whole today benefits from the labors of the apostles (through their inspired words passed down to us in Scripture, their perseverance, their example, etc.), we are to see this as a gift from God's hand, part of the means he has used to build his church? The focus is not upon church governance. Indeed, if such an office as "prophet" was meant to be perpetuated outside of the local body, why do we not see the apostles meeting this need by leaving men, as Paul left Titus in Crete, to set these things in order?

Another objection revolves around the reading and meaning of Acts 9:31: "So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase." Immediately those using the KJV or NKJV will note the key term *church* differs in their translations. For example, the NKJV reads: "Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied." Hence, the text is disputed, the majority of manuscripts reading "churches."

However, the most ancient manuscripts by far favor the reading "church." So taking the singular as the preferred reading, does this passage contradict the thesis that the churches of Christ exist as individual local bodies? We surely do not believe so. Acts 9:31 would make perfect sense whether you say "churches" or "church," while such passages as Revelation 1–3 would not make sense taking the churches as a collective singular. The point of Acts 9:31 is not to address the idea of local churches at all but to speak to the events in a particular region relevant to persecution. The object of persecution is the "church," just as Paul said he persecuted "the church" (1 Cor. 15:9). One can hardly expect the enemies of the faith to be overly concerned about Christian ecclesiology: they are persecuting the Christian faith *en toto.* Since the object is not fixed in the sense of persecution of only one local body in Acts 9, the generic singular is used to say that, upon Paul's departure to Tarsus, the church as a whole in the region had peace.

The Plurality of Elders in the Local Church: Biblical Evidence

We turn now to the biblical evidence that God intends the church to possess a plurality of elders, and that the ministry of the Word, the exhortation of the saints, the maintenance of godly discipline, the refutation of false teaching—all these vital aspects of the life of the church are to be undertaken by a body of elders.[7] We will discuss the issue of differing roles among the elders after establishing the importance of the office, the nature of the office, and the qualifications thereof.

Two primary Greek terms underlie the various English terms used to describe the elder, overseer, or bishop: *presbuteros* and *episkopos.* The term translated "pastor" or "shepherd" is *poimen.* While later ecclesiastical history drew sharp distinctions between each of these terms, elevating the bishop, lowering the overseer/elder, and creating, in Roman Catholicism, a myriad of orders, classes, and subcategories for each, the biblical usage is straightforward. By comparing the use of these terms in parallel passages we are able to discover that the apostles used these terms in a basically interchangeable fashion. As a result, the careful reading of the text reveals that two offices or positions exist in the New Testament church: the elder and the deacon. The elder may be referred to as an overseer or bishop as well. The history of the spread of the church shows how important this organization was in the thinking of the apostles, and the pastoral Epistles, which lay out key elements of church polity, likewise bear out the centrality of these two offices.

When Luke begins his narrative of the growth of the church, he uses the term *elders* in its pre-Christian Jewish context, that of the "scribes and elders."[8] But as he turns to the establishment of local churches by Paul and his companions in their missionary work, he makes a very important observation:

> After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed (Acts 14:21–23 NASB).

As the apostles sought to establish and confirm the churches that were birthed through the proclamation of the gospel, they knew there was a need for encouragement, oversight, and order. Even though Paul had experienced great persecution (even to the point of being stoned) immediately prior to the events of this passage, he is focused upon the establishment and encouragement of the

churches. One of the vital aspects of his ministry was to appoint elders in every church. So important was this that we discover it remained a central part of the apostolic mission until the very end: “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you” (Titus 1:5 NASB). Here the next generation after the apostles continues the same pattern: part of “setting in order” the churches in Crete was the appointment of elders in every city just as the apostle Paul had directed Titus. The parallel between the two passages is striking. We note a few important aspects.

First, both passages use the plural form, *elders.* This is not to be understood merely in the sense of one elder per church. Both passages contradict this. Acts 14:23 (NASB) says “elders for them in every church,” and Titus 1:5 (NASB) has “elders in every city.” In each instance we have a plural number of elders in a singular location or context. This is the apostolic pattern: plural elders in each church. This is part of the “setting in order” of the church.

Second, if it is suggested that the elder is something other than the highest ecclesiastical office in the local church (such as one who would say a singular pastor would stand over a board of elders, the pastoral position being “other than” one of the elders, or that a “bishop” is something other than a “presbyter” or “elder” in office), we are left with no record of the apostolic establishment of these offices as part of their organization and equipping of the church! It should strike us as strange that entire offices of the church could be established without even so much as a notice in the inspired record.

Third, it was part of the apostle's ministry of establishing and encouraging the believers that the elders were appointed in the churches. Acts 14:22 (NASB) speaks of the apostles, “strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith,” and part and parcel of how they did this included the proper ordering of the church. They appointed elders in those churches. We must remember that Paul instructed Timothy, “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2 NASB). There is little reason to question, in light of Paul's listing the ability to teach as one of the qualifications of the elder (1 Tim. 3:2), that Paul has elders in mind when exhorting Timothy to entrust the things he had heard from Paul to “faithful men.” The abiding presence of divine truth in the church is one of the greatest comforts to the saints. Therefore, establishing the mechanism whereby that truth can be safeguarded is very much part of comforting, establishing, and encouraging the saints.

We see then that the apostolic work involved the appointment of elders (plural) in each church (singular). This was not an optional activity as far as they were concerned. Paul specifically directed Titus to this very work, and attended to it himself, even in the midst of persecution (Acts 14:23).[9] At the same time, we do not see the apostles creating structures involving super-elders with jurisdiction beyond the local assemblies. Such a concept must be derived from extending unique apostolic actions past the apostolic age, and we do not believe there is sufficient biblical warrant for accepting such a suggestion.

Paul and the Ephesian Elders

One of the most compelling biblical examples of the plurality of elders is found in Acts 20:17: “From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church” (NASB). This incident takes place after a lengthy period of ministry in Ephesus. Paul knew the church at Ephesus well, and in comparison with other churches, Ephesus would be “mature.” When Paul wishes to meet with the leaders of the church, he does not call for a single pastor, but for the elders (plural) of the church. This means the church at Ephesus was identifiable, and so was the body of elders. The very same truth is found in Paul's greeting to the church at Philippi: “Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons” (Phil. 1:1 NASB). Here both the overseers (plural) and deacons are noted. Both of these churches were founded by Paul, and both had functioning elderships from the beginning. The elders of the church at Ephesus responded to Paul's call, and in his farewell address to them, he refers to them as overseers (*episkopoi*) and shepherds of the flock of God:

> For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them (Acts 20:27–30 NASB).

All the primary terms come together in the description of the elders of the church. Speaking to a body of elders of an organized, local church, the apostle intertwines the key terms used throughout his letters, including “overseer” (in the plural, showing that all the elders were overseers) and, through the use of the term *flock*, and the verb *to shepherd*, he relates the pastoral concept as well.

We would be remiss if we did not pause to ponder another aspect of these inspired words. In speaking to these men, Paul makes direct reference to the source of their eldership: “the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” The office of overseer/elder is divine in its origination and authority: indeed, many of those men had been appointed to their position by Paul himself, but Paul recognized he was only the Spirit's tool. The Spirit gifts and calls men to that ministry. This aspect of the church's ongoing ministry should not be minimized. Just as the church is to be ordered and organized, so too the Spirit is pleased to continue his ministry of calling men into the eldership as God perpetuates the church over time. God may use means to effectuate that call, but the call always remains divine and therefore worthy of respect.

Note as well that the Spirit made them overseers in the midst of “the flock.” This is a specific group, and just as any shepherd must know his sheep, so the shepherds of the church at Ephesus would know the sheep placed in their care.[10] And it is in this local context that the phrase “the church of God” is used. Surely the church of God, purchased with his own blood, goes beyond the church at Ephesus in extent, but the glorious truth that the church is blood-bought and redeemed is true of each individual flock, each body of gathered believers.

But the apostles knew that despite the divine origination of the elders' calling and office, the work of ministry would remain difficult. Paul calls the elders to look to themselves, for they will always be the target of the attacks of the enemy. And he warns them that men will arise even from their own ranks who will lead the sheep astray, ravening wolves, not sparing the flock. Why is this important to our current study? Many times it is argued that the simple, basic structure of local churches with elders and deacons is insufficient in light of major false teachings or other “developments” that over time require “more.” And yet when Paul warns the elders of coming apostasy, even to the point of saying that the false teachers will come from among their own ranks, he does not then direct them to an ecclesiastical structure outside of the church at Ephesus. He does not direct them to the bishop of Rome or to anything outside of what God has provided for his people down through history: “And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32 NASB).

The “pragmatic” argument fails here. It may be nice to have some structure in place that one feels will place the church in a “better” position to respond to this situation or that, but in the final analysis God's wisdom has decreed that the

church is to struggle and contend for the truth (Jude 4; Phil. 1:27), and that she is to rely only upon what God has given her, not upon the arm of flesh, in that warfare.

Surely there is nothing unusual in Luke's language as he describes this historical incident. It was not unusual, then, for a local church to be led by elders, nor that the elders should be interchangeably seen as overseers or shepherds of the flock of God.

Qualifications of Elders

In God's providence we have been given two examples of the very standards used by the apostles in fulfilling the work noted previously, that of appointing elders in the churches. These lists of qualifications are found in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9. When Paul wrote to Timothy concerning the form and function of the "church of the living God," he instructed:

> It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money. He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?), and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil. And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil (1 Tim. 3:1–7 NASB).

The qualifications of the elder do not, directly, speak to competing theories of church governance, since surely all would agree that those who function as elders should have these traits as part of their character. But we can glean some important truths regarding the debate from what is said by the apostle Paul to Timothy. First, though the NASB's "office of overseer" is somewhat dynamic, the underlying text supports the thought. While the first elders were apostolically appointed, the office must become self-perpetuating, and here we have the outlines of how this is to take place.

Next, we see that the elder is a teacher, for one of the listed qualifications is the ability to teach (this will relate below to the discussion of the "pastor/teacher"). The elders are in charge of "taking care of the church of God." The text does not say "assisting higher-ups in taking care of the church of God."

The reason the elder must be in charge of his own household is that he is the head of that household. In the same way the elders lead the local church.

Paul gave very similar instructions to Titus:

> For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict (Titus 1:5–9 NASB).

We have already noted the important fact that the establishment of elders (plural) in each church (in this passage, “city”) is definitional of “setting in order” the church itself. Here the two terms “elder” and “overseer” are used in a completely interchangeable manner in consecutive sentences. No basis can be provided, biblically, for creating distinctions between the terms (though this surely took place over the course of history in the traditions of men).

Further, the elder/overseer is seen as “God's steward,” one entrusted with a sacred task and office. The personal attributes that are to exist in his life are directly related to the nature of the office he seeks to hold.

It is important to see as well that the elder is to be doctrinally sound, “holding fast the faithful word.” Why? Because he has a vital role in the church, that of exhorting in sound doctrine and refuting those who contradict. This is important to our topic, for history is replete with examples that show that when an ecclesiastical organization is created that exists above and beyond the biblical paradigm, the responsibilities for doctrinal purity and apologetics are transferred to these other offices, leaving the elders of the local congregation (if such offices even continue to exist in any meaningful fashion) in the position of repeating what is mandated to them by a “higher authority.”

We would like to suggest that this is not only dangerous because it violates the biblical pattern and mandate, but history has shown that such structures are by far the most effective means for the spreading of false teaching and error. The limitations inherent in the ecclesiastical structure found in Scripture serve, whether we are willing to confess it or not, to curb the very false teaching (and teachers) Paul warned about in Acts 20. A false teacher with limited authority in

one congregation is to be expected in the course of things; a false teacher in an ecclesiastical structure that allows him to spread his views far and wide under the guise of “the church” is a tragedy.

So we see that the responsibility for the exhortation in sound doctrine and for the refutation of errors does not fall upon a body above and beyond the local eldership of the church. It is in the local body that the word of God is brought directly to the members of the church. The removal of these immediate duties by shifting the true responsibility to another structure has been disastrous to the church. When we take seriously the fact that it is the responsibility of the elders of the church to bring the Word of God in all its fullness to us, we will stop trying to force them to be CEOs. We will instead exhort them to faithfulness in study, prayer and preparation, and the deacons together with the faithful will work diligently to care for the other activities of the church so as to await expectantly the feast of truth to be delivered through their ministry.

The elders who realize their true role as listed in these qualifications will find great joy in the clear proclamation of God's truth and will sense the responsibility that is theirs to refute error and protect the flock against the myriads of false teachers and aberrant theologies that swirl about us. When these responsibilities are removed and placed upon others, the eldership withers. God's wisdom has been clearly expressed in Scripture. We dare not seek to “improve” upon it.

Peter's Testimony

Another passage of Holy Writ that speaks to the work of the elders in the church comes from the apostle Peter:

> Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory (1 Pet. 5:1–4 NASB).

If the passage is taken in a general fashion it could be argued that the “elders among you” could, conceivably, refer to singular elders in different locations. But given what we have already seen, it is far more consistent to see this as another reference to the plurality of elders within the local congregation,

and the text bears this out. Peter exhorts the elders to “shepherd the flock of God among you.” One must have knowledge of the identity of the sheep to shepherd them properly, of course, and this only takes place within the context of the local assembly. The command “to shepherd” points us to the fact that elders are pastors. Though elders may take more or less openly “pastoral” roles, the fact that they provide leadership, direction, teaching, and example is part and parcel of what it means to lead or pastor the flock.

Further, Peter speaks to the manner of their exercise of oversight, and we have found no evidence of a role for elders to exercise oversight over anything other than the local assembly. Peter speaks of “those allotted to your charge,” which limits the scope of the ministry of the elder. He commands elders to be an example to the flock, which requires observation of one's life and character. All of these considerations fit perfectly within the model of the independent, elder-led local church.

Pastors and Teachers

What of the phrase “pastors and teachers” at Ephesians 4:11? “And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:11–13 NASB). We noted this passage briefly before regarding the other offices mentioned (prophets, evangelists, etc.). Here we note the phrase “pastors and teachers.” It has been rightly suggested that instead of two separate and distinct concepts, the use of the article suggests a composite whole, “pastors/teachers.” It is impossible to pastor the sheep without teaching, both overtly and by example, just as it is impossible to teach God's truth aright without application and exhortation. We have already seen that teaching and exhortation in sound doctrine are the requisite abilities of the elder.

Some might see each of the terms, outside of the extraordinary work of the apostles, as different aspects of the one ministry of those called to be elders: some prophesy in telling forth the word of God, calling men to repentance (the normal use of “prophesy” in the verbal form); others are evangelists in spreading the good news; others as pastors/teachers within the flock. This is possible, though it is also possible to see prophets and evangelists as extraordinary offices in the early church (Acts 21:8–11).

In any case, those given to pastor and teach the church are given for the purpose of building up the church. The only mechanism, established by the Holy Spirit in the God-breathed Scriptures, for the continuation of such an office, is that of the elders of the local church. Any other office has to find as its basis some form of inference or extrapolation, often based upon some assumed “need” in the church. But the elders can stand upon the firm bedrock of unquestioned divine revelation for their function and duties.

Further testimony to the plurality of elders is found in James 5:14: “Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord” (NASB). It required no explanation on James's part to speak of the elders (plural) of the church (singular). The sick did not have to wonder who these elders were or “which church” they would be contacting. The ease with which this statement is made assumes a preexisting (and very primitive) structure identical to that seen elsewhere in Scripture.

The same kind of situation is found in the exhortation to the Hebrews: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:17 NASB). Again, the local churches, with a body of discernable elders, is clearly in view. The elders are the leaders, and believers are exhorted to submit to them. Keeping watch over their souls is directly parallel to the duties already enunciated by Paul and Peter in Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5. Their responsibility as leaders to whom believers submit is clearly seen in the fact that they will give an account for the souls entrusted to them. Believers are given a duty to make the ministry of those leaders a joyous one, not a grievous one. Obviously, all of this assumes discernible leaders, a discernible fellowship that involves interaction and discipleship, etc.

All of these passages collectively make clear that the church as founded by the apostles expressed itself in local assemblies that included the offices of elder/overseer and deacon. These offices are established by the apostles for the equipping of the body, and no other office is provided with lists of qualifications for its continuation in the church over the generations. It is natural and easy for the New Testament authors to refer to elders (plural) in the church (singular), and the readers of those documents evidently needed no extended explanation to understand since this was the form in which the apostles founded the local churches.

Application of Biblical Revelation

Having seen that the biblical data points to local churches functioning under the direction of a plurality of elders, along with deacons serving to minister to the physical needs of the flock, specific questions come to mind regarding the working out of the biblical outlines. Some of these questions have engendered divergent answers from godly men, but others can be answered in a fairly straightforward manner.

The plurality of elders as the paradigm for the leadership of the church raises the question of how the elders relate to one another. What is the purpose in a plurality over against a singular elder/ pastor? Is it not natural to speak of a singular pastor in a congregation, even if there are other elders who assist him? Are all elders equal to one another? Is there any distinction made between elders?

We should begin with the issue of the relationship of the elders to one another. Are all elders equal? Well, with reference to eldership, it would seem so. Each is, if truly called of God to the work, an elder by the will and direction of the Holy Spirit of God. The Scriptures speak of the elders as guiding, teaching, directing, shepherding, and of believers submitting to their guidance and oversight. Such a position, within the living body of Christ on earth, is never to be entered into lightly, to be sure. It is a great privilege to be called into such work, indeed, the highest privilege one could have. As Paul said, it is a fine or honorable work (1 Tim. 3:1). And since there is only one office of elder, as far as eldership itself is concerned, the elders would be equal to one another.

This is not to say, however, that there are no distinctions as to ministry and gifts. No two men are identical to each other. One may have gifts of teaching while another has greater gifts in administration or discipline. One may be able to tell forth God's truths with great passion and power, while another is better at speaking to individuals, giving comfort and encouragement. These differences in gifting and personality, together with the fact that each individual body will have its own character based upon size, age, and location, can lead to a variety of applications of the single concept of a plurality of elders. A small fellowship, for example, may only be able to support a single man in full-time ministry. As a result, you may have one man who does the majority of the preaching, though accompanied in his work by elders who maintain secular employment, yet stand together with the fully supported elder as a unified group of elders. In such a situation it is natural for the one man to have a more public “face” than the other

elders, not because he is a different kind of elder but merely in how his gifts are exercised in the fellowship.

Historically, those who have held to the view of church governance through a plurality of elders have often made a distinction involving the use of the phrase “ruling elders” over against those who engage in the public ministry of the Word. That is, it has been recognized that some elders are gifted to assist especially in the disciplinary/oversight aspect of the ministry in the church, providing a much needed support to those preaching and teaching with regularity. This kind of distinction comes to expression in the words of Paul to Timothy:

> The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,” and “The laborer is worthy of his wages.” Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses (1 Tim. 5:17–19 NASB).

Here we have Paul speaking of the honor due to elders who “rule well.” Aside from the fact that this speaks to the authority of elders within the congregation, there seems to be the reality that some elders rule better than others. Not all are equally gifted in every aspect of ministry.

The text then introduces another distinction, “especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.” Some have argued that “especially” should be taken in such a fashion as to indicate an almost complete separation between elders who “rule” and those who preach and teach. But this puts far too much weight upon *malista* (“especially”) to perform as a disjunctive. Instead, it seems Paul is recognizing that it is inherent in the office that the elder exercise authority and leadership (“rule,” NASB, NKJ, ESV, “direct the affairs of the church,” NIV), and such is worthy of commendation, especially when done skillfully and with wisdom.

But beyond that, there are those who work and labor at teaching and preaching. It is not that Paul is saying they do not “rule” as well, but their emphasis, their focus, is upon laboring in the hard, difficult work of teaching and preaching God's truth in the context of the church. Such elders are “especially” due double honor. This surely speaks to a distinction in gifts and function within the eldership, but it does not create “super-elders” or the like. All are elders, but God gifts each as he chooses.[11]

In light of this recognition of different areas of emphasis and function

within the text of Scripture itself, it is understandable why, in working out the plurality of elders within the local churches, differing results have been obtained. It is one of the beauties of the divine wisdom of God in establishing his church in this fashion that the individual groups of elders are left with the freedom to evaluate their situation, their resources, their gifts and talents and use their God-given wisdom to meet the needs of the flock in the most effective way possible. That will not always result in identical decisions between fellowships regarding the division of labor or even the use of terms.

Some fellowships may divide the preaching and teaching duties up in an almost even way among the elders, while others may concentrate the duties with one or two men. Some may use the term *pastor* in a singular fashion of the man who is normally entrusted with the duties of preaching, teaching, “marrying and burying,” while others may use the term for all elders, irrespective. Ironically, many who hold firmly to the independence and self-sufficiency of the local church will be just as quick to tell another group of elders exactly how they should do things in *their* fellowship.

If our examination of Scripture is correct, then the plurality of elders reflects the divine will and divine wisdom. As such, we can derive some important lessons from it. First, working within the context of the eldership fosters maturity on the part of those engaged in the work of ministry. Not only can the elders learn from one another, but they can be challenged by the examples of godliness they see in the lives of others. Those who are trained in the Word can train others and help them to grow in the knowledge of the Scriptures. And few things knit the hearts of believing men closer together than standing side-by-side in the proclamation and defense of the gospel of Jesus Christ! Agonizing together in defense of God's truth creates a bond that few other things in life can rival.

Over against a single-pastor model, the plurality of elders provides a check against the “one man against the world” syndrome that has been seen so often in church history. Mutual submission within the eldership and respect for one's fellow elders are wonderful antidotes to the “one man show” problem that almost everyone has seen in the church if they have ministered for any time at all. God did not gift any one man with all the gifts necessary to minister to the flock. It is wise in the extreme to recognize the plurality of elders as a gift from God whereby the full spectrum of needs of the flock can be met properly.

The exercise of godly discipline in the church is likewise greatly assisted by the plurality of elders. Bringing rebuke to bear upon an unrepentant sinning

member is never an easy thing. We all, knowing our own sinfulness and need of grace and mercy, need encouragement to handle such situations in a godly fashion. When a church seeks to honor God by obeying his commands regarding the discipline that is to mark the church of Christ, a body of godly elders is best suited to bring this discipline to bear. Since they exist within the fellowship, they will know the individuals involved and will be able to minister far more effectively than some individual from an ecclesiastical organization far away. And the elders can encourage one another to do what is right, providing support and strength for what is often a very difficult, and at times discouraging, task.

There is another great aspect of God's wisdom in how he has ordered his church in this way as well, noted briefly above. While there is everything right and good in churches freely cooperating with one another in the promotion of godliness, missionary work, and the like, the jurisdictional boundaries created by local bodies with functioning elderships serve to check the spread of false teaching. False teaching will always be present during the pilgrimage of the church. The elders are to fight against it (Titus 1:9). But when it arises within a fellowship, as Paul said it would (Acts 20:30), at the very least, when a proper ecclesiastical structure is in place, the error is “limited” in its scope. While the false teacher(s) may lead members of that flock astray, the impact is limited by the local church itself.

But if a structure is created that goes beyond the local boundaries of the church and places power in the hands of an individual far beyond anything envisioned in the New Testament, similar, in some fashion, to that exercised by the apostles themselves, the result of false teaching and error is magnified a hundredfold or more. How many times has this very thing happened in the history of the church? No one can count. Such is what happens when the boundaries set by *sola scriptura* are transgressed by tradition.

Conclusion

The biblical evidence of the existence of a plurality of elders is incontrovertible. The question really focuses upon whether there is warrant for inferring some kind of higher ecclesiastical body that transcends the local elders in authority. And the answer to this question will depend upon the consistent application of the principle of *sola scriptura*. If we approach church governance as we approach, for example, worship (the two are actually closely related), we will see that if we are consistent, we should see those who are most concerned

about the proper worship of God likewise eschewing those ecclesiastical structures that are not given solid footing within the inspired text. The less concern there is for finding exegetically sound biblical warrant for the activities of the church, the less concern there will be for obtaining a truly biblical form of church government.

The issue is an important one, despite the fact that it hardly appears on the "radar screen" of the modern church. It truly reflects how much we really believe Jesus is Lord of his church and is concerned that it functions as he has commanded. May this discussion and interaction lead us all to a careful, and prayerful, examination of this issue, all to the glory of God through Christ Jesus.

Responses to James R. White's Plural-Elder Polity

Response by James Leo Garrett, Jr.

Dr. White and I are obviously in substantial agreement concerning the independence of local or particular churches and the lack of any evidence in the New Testament for transcongregational or hierarchical structures. We also concur in emphasizing the once-for-all character of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15). But differences are indeed apparent and call for attention.

First, Dr. White does not fully explain how he wishes to apply *sola Scriptura*. He defines the term as the teaching "that the Scriptures" [as "God-breathed revelation"] "are the sole infallible rule of faith for the church." At the same time he acknowledges that "everyone embraces 'tradition at some level,'" while he rejects the approach of those who apply *sola Scriptura* "in a less stringent fashion." I believe that the discussion of church polity would be better served by Dr. White's acknowledging that *sola Scriptura* is better interpreted as *suprema Scriptura*.[12] Does the church of which he is a member have a confession of faith, and as a member does he acknowledge or adhere to it? If so, that confession has some kind of secondary or subordinate authority. Hence *suprema Scriptura* would enable Dr. White to attain his goal of examining all tradition "in the light of Scripture."

Second, it is important to notice that Dr. White takes no account of Acts 6:1–4 (which does not speak of *elders* but is important for congregational decision-making) or of Acts 13:1–3 (which does not speak of *elders* but is significant for the congregation and missions) but dwells on Acts 20:17–38 (which does speak of *elders)* and that he employs Matthew 18:15–20 to establish

that Jesus was referring to the “gathered” or local church (without a “court of higher appeal”) but does not examine the decision-making functions of this gathered church, presumably because he wants to safeguard such for the elders.

Third, Dr. White does not give specific and unambiguous answer to the question as to how elders are to be chosen after the era of the apostles. He states: “The once-for-allness of the situation that engendered the council of Acts 15 and the role of the ‘apostles and elders’ of the church at Jerusalem had to be kept in mind when considering their relevance as a foundation for an ongoing ecclesiastical structure.” Then, in commenting on 1 Timothy 3:1–7, Dr. White declares: “While the first elders were apostolically appointed, the office must become self-perpetuating, and here we have the outlines of how this takes place.” Does this mean that Dr. White is positing a historical succession of elders chosen and ordained by preceding elders (a concept not unlike the role of the “bishop” according to the theory of apostolic succession)? If so, where does this leave the gathered church, whose autonomy Dr. White has vigorously defended? Does the local church simply accept as elders those whom existing elders have selected as their successors?

Similarly, Dr. White is quite certain that the Holy Spirit calls and gives gifts to specific men as elders. Does the congregation have no role in discerning and affirming such call and giftedness? Baptists have usually favored a both/and answer, whereas Dr. White seems to favor an either/or answer.

Fifth, in essence Dr. White is arguing that Baptists have been wrong on polity for four centuries and now they should be set straight, for a plurality of elders has a biblical basis, and a single pastor-elder-bishop and plural deacons do not. Hence, his argument would say, the earliest Baptists[13] were wrong in abandoning the ruling elders of their Puritan-Separatist heritage, and that error needs correction at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Those early Baptist congregations in England and North America, which struggled to find one qualified and available pastor, were not obedient to Christ by not having a plurality of elders. Moreover, large urban Baptist churches today, which have gathered a body or “staff” of full-time specialized ministers under the leadership of a pastor, are not following the mandated polity because all ministers do not have equal authority in all matters.

Sixth, Dr. White seems to expend his greatest energy in refuting the advocates of transcongregational or hierarchical polities, and thus he seems less willing or able to deal with the nature, the history, and the functions of Congregationalism. If he had undertaken the latter, he might have discovered

that practitioners of Congregationalism have not only been alarmed by the "monsters" outside and above the congregation but also by the "monsters" within the congregation. Dr. White's model seemingly affords no means of correcting heresy or immorality within a majority of elders.

Seventh, Dr. White does not tell his readers how his pattern of elder rule within autonomous congregations should actually be implemented today. Would all Sundays school teachers give up their roles and their classes so that all teaching could be done by one or more of the elders? What types of decision-making, if any, would remain for the congregation as a whole under such elder rule? What happens when the elders do not agree among themselves? Until such questions are adequately answered, we would do well not to abandon Congregational polity wherein the congregation has final authority under the lordship of Christ.

Response by Daniel L. Akin

James White's argument for plurality of elders is a careful, scripturally grounded defense of the position. His presentation and argument are rooted in the proposition, "Our understanding of the nature, mission, purpose, commission, and form of the church must first and foremost come from the careful, consistent exegesis of the Word of God." I enthusiastically affirm and applaud this approach.

Because I believe Scripture allows for a plurality of elders with a pastor-teacher (who is one of the elders) within a congregational structure, there is much in Dr. White's chapter that I agree with and few points of disagreement. My comments will, therefore, be relatively brief.

First, Dr. White is correct that tradition can never take the place of what is clearly revealed in Scripture. Second, when he speaks of the leadership and "divinely instituted guidance of elders," he uses the language of Scripture. Third, Dr. White provides a solid and scriptural defense of local church sufficiency (autonomy). Fourth, Dr. White accurately notes "the lack of any reference to an ecclesiastical structure existing above the elders of the church." Fifth, Dr. White also sees church discipline as indisputable evidence for some form of Congregationalism. Sixth, I appreciate Dr. White's fine discussion both for a plurality of godly leaders or elders, and their responsibilities as laid out in Scripture. Seventh, Dr. White reminds us that "God's wisdom has decreed that *the church* [italics mine] is to struggle and contend for the truth." This is further evidence for some type of congregational polity.

Eighth, Dr. White correctly points out that plurality of leadership does not negate distinctions as to ministry and gifts. So far so good. However, it is at this point that he (and others) separate *teaching* and *ruling* elders, a distinction that simply will not stand up under careful biblical analysis. All elders teach and all elders rule as 1 Timothy 3:1–7 makes abundantly clear. Ninth, Dr. White points out the healthy check and balance a plurality of leaders provides against the "one man show" problem, and the essential and mutual accountability it offers. Tenth, Dr. White at least implies that within a plurality of elders there may be one who is designated as pastor" and who bears the responsibilities of preaching, teaching, etc. In saying this he is not far from the kingdom! (At least the kingdom of ecclesiology I have defended!)

As to my points of concern, I do wish Dr. White had engaged more thoroughly the literature on this issue. There are only eleven brief footnotes. Second, the complete absence of any discussion of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and its implications for church polity is a serious omission. Of course, the doctrine does not aid a number of expressions of elder rule, and perhaps Dr. White thought that "silence" on the issue was the best call. Third, it seems to me that Dr. White does not sufficiently address the role of the pastor-teacher among the elders either theologically or practically. There is a pattern throughout Scripture, as I attempted to demonstrate, of a leader who is "first among equals." Virtually every church I know which practices a plurality of elders functions in this way. Those who advocate a plurality of elders should be more clear in acknowledging this.

Fourth, I believe Dr. White and those of his way of thinking simply miss 1 Timothy 5:17–18 by reading into the text what is "plainly" not there. This separation of teaching and ruling elders, as I pointed out, is found first in Calvin, not Peter, Paul, James, or John. Fifth, Dr. White fails, as do most others, to consider how the "house church" in the early history of Christianity would potentially impact the issue of ecclesiology. Multiple house churches in a city or area would require multiple elders, though exactly how many, and in what form, the Scriptures are silent. Sixth, I am not convinced that "the highest ecclesiastical authority established by Christ is found in the elders" is the best or even biblical way of acknowledging the rightful leadership assignment that God has given them. Authority resides in the lordship of Christ and his gospel. If elders, as a whole, stray doctrinally, it is the church's responsibility to rein them in. Finally, when Dr. White says the structure of the church is so clearly seen that there is little room for discussion on the matter, surely he overstates the case. After all, this book has been written, hasn't it?

Response by Paul F. M. Zahl

James White's essay on the “plurality of elders as Christ's ordained means of church governance” is stirring, even passionate; thorough, even exhaustive; and most humbly bound to Scripture.

But I am not convinced. This is because his approach, like Dr. Reymond's, assigns too much value to the concept of church. From an Anglican perspective, I can honestly say that Dr. White's piece is high church! It inflates, and universalizes, an aspect of theology that is more safely weighted as secondary.

Ecclesiology is not tertiary. That is for sure. Ecclesiology is important. It carries implications for the here and now. Ecclesiology is not, however, primary. Or so I have argued. Form is not part of the *esse* of the church; it is part of her *bene esse.* White's argument is an *esse* argument. Let's see how he makes his case. The author opens up with a dazzling and almost overwhelming declaration:

> The church of Jesus Christ is a divinely ordained institution, gifted by God to function as he wills. His promise to build his church, and the amazing fact that he has chosen to demonstrate his manifold wisdom “to the rules and authorities in heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10) through the church, provides a compelling reason to believe that his design of the church itself is just as *eternal*, just as *divinely wise*, and just as *clearly revealed* (emphasis added).

Right off the bat, James White is making divine claims for the human governance of Christ's church. The history of Christianity makes White's view extremely problematic. It also burdens the institution with a mandate of divine perfection that is impossible to carry out. If Dr. White is correct, then any church that has ever existed will have to depart in shame from Christ, as Peter did, wailing, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.”

The assumption here, as with the chapter on Presbyterianism (i.e., Sanhedrinism), is that the New Testament is unmistakably clear on the precise polity of Christ's body. White carries his case forward ambitiously, but the whole enterprise I regard as chancy, and finally unhelpful. This is because only with atonement theology, only with the incarnation, only with Christology and with anthropology, ought we to go to Scripture with such high expectations. Even then, handling the primary values and issues of faith, we come across some varying emphases and some relatively diverging possibilities. Yes, the New Testament preaches substitutionary atonement. Yes, the New Testament observes man as originally sinful in the full weight of that concept. But there are also a

few exceptions, a few Pelagian bits, a shade more “exemplary” texts. The overwhelming witness is on the side of evangelical orthodoxy. But it is not 100 percent—unless you ditch 2 Peter and the end of James. Now with church governance, we are going to have to put the whole message through a very thick scrim in order to be able to reduce them to one single model. Dr. White seeks to do this very thing. *Vaut à la peine?*

The way here is the way of local churches “made up of elders and deacons.” “The officers of the church are capable of providing, through the gifting of the Spirit within them, for all which is necessary for the church to function as the ‘pillar and foundation of the truth’ wherever the local congregation is planted.” All which is necessary? That is an awesome claim. To the credit of his consistency, and his courage, White sticks to his claim.

Dr. White's appetite for pinning things down extends to his assigning four marks rather than the traditional two (i.e., for Anglicans and Lutherans) or the traditional three (i.e., for the Reformed) to the visible church:

> The church comes to expression in visible, discernible local bodies of believers where the Word of God is preached and honored, obedience is shown to Christ's command to baptize and “proclaim the Lord's death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26) through the celebration of the Supper, the offices of the church are established and functioning, and discipline is exercised in accordance with divine command (1 Cor. 5).

The author wants to root *four* essential marks of the visible church in a New Testament norm.

James White, like quite a few other evangelicals, makes much of Matthew 18:16: the two or three witnesses in the matter of congregational discipline. I worry whether that verse is not dominical but rather an addition to Matthew. It seems to presuppose a degree of organization beyond the time and ministry of Christ himself. I am nervous about giving it heavy weight.

To the good, Dr. White's discussion of the churches of Revelation 1–3 seems ultimately right. They were obviously all local independent congregations. They were probably all under the charge of elders “led by such apostolically trained men as Timothy.” The discussion then turns to Acts 15, in relation to which White rebuts Dr. Reymond's idea of a “continuing ecclesiastical body that exists above the local churches themselves.”

As a “low-church” Episcopalian, I am entirely comfortable with the interchangeable nature of *presbyteros* and *episkopos* in the New Testament,

which White underlines; as well as the renunciation of a “pipeline” theory of apostolic succession.

Paul's Ephesian elders are a primary witness to White's case, but not a necessary or exclusive argument. Paul was singular; the Ephesian elders were plural. They served together.

Why is the number of elders so important to this author? Why is it not possible to enjoin a more permeable theory, engaging the one, at times, and the many, at others? Why not leave it open yet existing in any event under the sole weight of the *theologis crucis?*

In defense of James White's earnestly contended for position, his view of independency does suggest freedom, and a sort of right-and-ready local option for dealing with problems in the church. Strategically, his polity may hold considerable promise, and practical insight. I don't deny that at all but am just wary of universalizing it.

Response by Robert L. Reymond

James White has written a very fine essay on the Congregational model functioning under the governance of a plurality of elders assisted by deacons. I greatly appreciate his commitment to the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* over against any and all long-held traditions as the ground for the determination of the form of church government that would best reflect the will of Jesus Christ, the King and Lord of the church. As one might expect, given my commitment to Presbyterian polity, I believe he adequately makes the case in the second part of his essay for a plurality of elders in the local congregation.

Where I take exception, again as one might expect, is with regard to his sustained argument in the first part of his essay that the Scriptures “show us locally autonomous congregations functioning directly under the headship of Christ” with no God-established structure above the local church. His arguments here are basically two: After his main argument that Scripture provides for no such structure above the local church, his second objection to such a structure—as advocates of Congregationalism regularly argue—is that those who advocate such a structure “must argue that the local church has not been given sufficient gifts within those called as elders and deacons to meet the [local] needs of the saints.” I will address these two arguments in the order that he raised them.

To make his case for his first contention that Scripture provides for no governmental structure above the local church, White first argues that if such a structure existed one would “surely” and “veritably” find “regular references”

being made to such, but because “no literature exists where Paul is addressing such a structure” such as an “entire epistle addressed to the presbytery of southern Achaia,” one may dismiss the existence of such a structure. This, of course, is an argument from silence: Just because one does not find “regular references” to such a structure (but see Paul's reference to a “presbytery” in 1 Tim. 4:14) and because one does not possess a letter to such a structure, one cannot infer that there is no such structure. Arguments from silence are always weak if not invalid. And would not one expect Paul out of Christian courtesy first to address a local church about some problem within it before he would urge that the problem being taken up elsewhere? I think so. This is precisely the procedure we find him following in Acts 15 in light of the problem that Peter had created for him earlier in Antioch (see Gal. 2:11–14).

White advances a second argument from silence in his exposition of Matthew 18:15–20. I concur with him that the church in view in the passage is the local church. But precisely because the universe of Jesus’ discourse is discipline within the local church, to infer that “there is no court of higher appeal” beyond the local church is again to argue from silence. There was no need for Jesus to elaborate upon disciplinary procedure when his universe of discourse is simply the local church and when elders in that culture regularly handled such matters. In actual Presbyterian *praxis,* the elders of the local church regularly handle the discipline of church members just as Jesus prescribes here, with appeal to presbytery rarely being made.

In his exposition of the churches of Revelation 1–3 White is reaching when he concludes, because individual lampstands can be removed without the removal of the others, that this shows “their independence and autonomy” in the Congregationalist sense of those words. Clearly this conclusion is a *non sequitur.* And to infer (1) from our Lord's direct dealings with these churches in Revelation 1–3 that no “hierarchical structure existed to which they gave their fealty and obedience,” and (2) that this particular account of these seven churches represents “the mature, completed paradigm upon which the church is to exist after the apostolic age” are unwarranted stretches of logic on his part. Again, these conclusions are *non sequiturs.*

In his effort to disenfranchise the use of Luke's Acts 15 account of the Jerusalem council for any and every attempt to make the case for a permanent governmental structure in the church above and beyond the governance of the local church, White makes the same mistake for which I faulted Louis Berkhof in my essay. Just as Berkhof erroneously argues that because the Jerusalem council was composed of apostles and elders, it cannot provide a proper example

and pattern of a presbytery or general assembly,[14] so also White argues that the council "was… apostolic in nature (and hence nonrepeatable)." He goes on to argue that "this council claimed direct and divine inspiration for its teachings [in and by its written deliverance] (connected, of course, to the presence of the apostles in her midst)," and concludes that "the very uniqueness of the situation…in reference to the presence of apostles, precludes its extension into a warrant for an entire structure unknown elsewhere in Scripture."

But I labored the point in my essay that this is the one conclusion that a careful reading of the Acts text will not tolerate. Not once does Luke suggest that the apostles who were present at the Jerusalem council "pulled rank" on the assembly and invoked their apostolic authority or issued apostolic declarations to the assembly at large. To the contrary, Luke represents the assembly as a "deliberative" body: he expressly informs us that the apostles involved themselves—apparently in their role as the elders that they were (see 1 Pet. 5:1; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6)—in "much discussion" with the other elders present. When Peter did speak, he simply appealed to his experience with Cornelius. When Paul spoke, he simply invoked the fact that God had borne witness to his law-free gospel in a probative way by performing miraculous signs and wonders among the Gentiles through him, something God quite obviously would not have done if Paul's gospel had not been true.

And when James summarized the assembly's proceedings, he cited Amos 9:11–12 as a summary statement of the teaching of all the Old Testament prophets for the biblical warrant for his concluding judgment. Then, to draw from the phrase in the council letter, "it seemed good to the Holy Spirit" (Acts 15:28), as White does, that the letter was inspired because apostles had a hand in writing it is simply an unfounded deduction for, as I also argued in my essay, the speeches at the assembly—Peter's account of Cornelius's conversion, Paul's reference to the signs God had done through him, and James's citation of Amos 9:11–12—provide ample and sufficient reasons, short of asserting inspiration for its written statement, for the assembly to say that the Holy Spirit had placed his divine *imprimatur* upon the conclusions at which they had arrived, not through immediate inspiration, but through debate and discussion. James Bannerman observes:

> The language of the letter is the very language appropriate to the case of men who were not decreeing anything by their own authority, but *ministerially* declaring and interpreting the mind of the Holy Ghost *as expressed in Scripture,* to the effect that no ceremonial observance of the

Mosaic law was necessary to salvation.[15]

In light of such grounding for their conciliar decision, when the church meeting in assembly issued its findings in the form of its letter—the result of debate and discussion, not divine inspiration—it had every reason to expect the regional presbyteries and local churches to abide by its decisions which, Luke informs us in Acts 16:4, they in fact did. Clearly the Jerusalem council was an authoritative church structure (but *not* a local church) above the presbyteries and local churches, to which the latter were expected to "give their fealty and obedience," to use White's phrase.

To White's second contention that those who urge some structure above the local church "must argue that the local church has not been given sufficient gifts within those called as elders and deacons to meet the [local] needs of the saints," I would simply reply: "Guilty, as charged." In my essay I emphasized, in light of (1) Christ's mandate for visible ecclesiastical unity before a watching world and (2) the purpose of the Spirit's gifts being the mutual edification of other believers and in *no* sense the encouragement to independency among God's people, that *there is no virtue in claiming congregational autonomy and independence*, indeed, that there may even be a certain *hubris* in such a claim, for does not Paul declare: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the foot, 'I don't need you! '" (1 Cor. 12:21)? And does not Paul's statement to the Roman church in Romans 1:11–12 ("For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you—that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine." ERV) mean that he believed the leaders of the church at Rome lacked something that he could supply them, and vice versa.

It seems to me, therefore, that any time a local church declares that it contains within itself *all* the gifts it needs to conduct *all* of its affairs in *all* matters of church concern, it is pushing against its Lord's mandate for visible ecclesiastical unity before the world, and it has forgotten that the purpose of the Spirit's gifts is mutual edification because Christians need one another. I ask again, as I did in my essay:

> Why…do Congregationalists put so much emphasis upon—indeed, even glory in as one of their distinctives—local church autonomy, self-consciously making their *independency* from each other and from other denominational churches a major reason for claiming 'bragging rights' over Presbyterian connectionalism so far as their form of church government reflecting the teaching of the New Testament is concerned? *But where in*

Scripture is there any mandate at all for such independency among local Christian congregations?

I believe there is no such mandate. To the contrary, in light of Christ's prayer for his church's visible oneness, Paul's constant emphasis on visible church unity, and the purpose of the Spirit's gifts, I think that every local Bible-believing congregation ought to feel the need for all the benefit it may receive from every other Bible-believing congregation around it and actively to seek this help and benefit from outside as conditions require. So when White states that it is "surely within the right" of these autonomous local churches to "cooperate with like-minded fellowships in their area to respond to a particular need," I would contend that his acknowledgement does not go far enough to meet the biblical mandate. It is not a question of what is "within rights." Like-minded congregations, according to the New Testament, are *obligated* to reach out to one another in their constant need for mutual aid, benefit, comfort, and edification.

I, for one, devoutly wish that the Presbyterian Church in America and the Southern Baptist Convention would each establish some kind of fraternal relationship between them to capitalize upon the areas in which the two church bodies could work together immediately to strengthen each other and to investigate whether there are not other ways as well that could be developed. If something like that could come out of this volume's interchange, the King and Lord of the church, I believe, would bless the effort.

I enjoyed very much reading James White's essay. It was both stimulating and challenging. I hope we can continue the interaction that this volume has begun.

Notes

Introduction

1. Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology: An Invitation to the Study of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 73–77.

2. Millard J. Erickson, "Polity," in *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, rev. ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001).

3. Donald K. McKim, "Polity," in *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

4. I recognize that others disagree with the designation of the individuals mentioned in Acts 6 as deacons. Nevertheless, even with this difference of interpretation, the point of organization of the early church for the care and ministry of widows within its membership is still valid.

5. Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 99–100.

6. For a work that demonstrates the interconnectivity between polity and the various functions and offices of the church, see Mark E. Dever, ed., *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001). The book is a collection of essays providing both contemporary and historical examples of the implications of polity for all of church life.

7. My point is not to describe in detail the differing major perspectives within Christendom on this point. Each contributor will make a detailed case for his understanding of the number and nature of the offices of the church. My point is simply to demonstrate the interconnectivity of polity and the offices of the church.

8. Dr. Paul Zahl, the representative of the Anglican position in this book, validated this observation in private correspondence.

9. Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, rev. and exp. ed. (Littleton, Colo.: Lewis and Roth, 1995), 140–59, 239–52; Ben Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003). See also the discussions in this volume from Garrett, Akin, Reymond, and White, who argue the same point.

10. Some scholars date the *Didache* earlier, perhaps as early as AD 80.

11. There is some evidence that Clement held the position of a monarchical bishop over all the congregations in Rome, but this evidence is late. He may have been considered the first among Roman presbyters, though. See *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., E. A. Livingstone and F. L. Cross, eds., s.v., "Clement of Rome" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

12. Ignatius, *Epistle to the Magnesians* 6, *The Apostolic Fathers and Justin Martyr and Irenaeus,* The Ante Nicene Fathers, vol. 1, Alexander Robertson, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.). Ante-Nicene Fathers volumes will hereafter be designated ANF.

13. *Didache* 15, *Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Kirsopp Lake, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 24 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960).

14. Lightfoot, in his seminal essay on this subject, notes that by the middle of the second century, "each Church or organized Christian community had its three orders of ministers, its bishops, its presbyters, and its deacons. On this point there cannot reasonably be two opinions." J. B. Lightfoot, *The Christian Ministry* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1901), 9.

15. Irenaeus and Tertullian argued that apostolic succession was verifiable since there existed lists of bishops (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.20.2, ANF, vol. 1; Tertullian *Prescription against Heretics* 21, *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian,* ANF, vol. 3). Not every denomination that follows an episcopal structure affirms apostolic succession. Some would prefer the term "historic episcopate," expressing their view that this is the primitive model, while recognizing that they cannot actually trace such succession historically to the first and second generations of church leadership. Robert Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 106.

16. Joseph H. Hall, "History and Character of Church Government," in *Paradigms in Polity: Classic Readings in Reformed and Presbyterian Church Government,* ed. David W. Hall and Joseph H. Hall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 5–6.

17. Tertullian, following the Montanist movement in his later years, objected to the assumption that hierarchy was preferable to charismatic power.

Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1976), 2:79.

18. Some have surmised that there were assorted groups from the earliest days of Christianity that may not have fit into the mold of what would become the developing "catholic" orthodoxy. David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America and other Parts of the World* (Boston: Lincoln & Edmands, 1813), 8.

19. Lightfoot, though he defends the threefold division as legitimate, notes that by the end of the apostolic age the office of bishop was still not distinct from that of presbyter. The threefold division is, then, a postapostolic development. Lightfoot, *Christian Ministry*, 23. Anglican theologian E. A. Litton argues that an informal episcopate likely sprang up even before the death of the apostles, though he offers no evidence that this is so. Edward Arthur Litton, *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Philip Edgecumbe Hughes (London: James Clarke, 1960), 401.

20. Leon Morris, "Church, Nature and Government of (Episcopalian View)," in *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Gary G. Cohen (Marshalltown, Del.: National Foundation for Christian Education, 1968), 2:483.

21. Origen, *Homilies on Exodus* 13.3, quoted in Jean Danielou, *Origen*, trans. Walter Mitchell (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955), 63.

22. Origen, *Against Celsus* 8.33, *Fathers of the Third Century*, ANF, vol. 4.

23. Quoted in Johannes Quasten, *Patrology, Volume 2: The Ante-Nicene Literature after Irenaeus* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1950), 375.

24. Cyprian, *The Epistles of Cyprian* 43.5; 49.2, *Fathers of the Third Century*, ANF, vol. V.

25. Ibid., 59.5.

26. Cyprian, *Treatises of Cyprian: On the Unity of the Church* 5, *Fathers of the Third Century*, ANF, vol. 5; *Epistles* 55.24. Cyprian, then, did not believe the Roman bishop to be superior to other bishops, though he did recognize the Roman church as the "chief church." Cyprian, *Epistles*, 54.14. See the discussion in Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought, Volume 1: From the Beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 241–45.

27. Cyprian, *Epistles* 73.21.

28. Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church* 6.

29. G. W. H. Lampe, “Christian Theology in the Patristic Period,” in *A History of Christian Doctrine*, ed. Hubert Cunliffe-Jones and Benjamin Drewery (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 171.

30. Quoted in Henry Bettenson, *Later Christian Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 189.

31. Jerome, *Epistles* 14.8, *The Principal Works of St. Jerome, The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 6, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), (hereafter cited as NPNF).

32. Augustine, *On Original Sin* 2.11, quoted in David L. Smith, *All God's People: A Theology of the Church* (Wheaton, Ill.: Bridgepoint, 1996), 58.

33. Augustine, *Psalm* 127.3, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, NPNF 1st series, vol. 8.

34. Donatism was a holiness sect in North Africa that broke away from the bishops of the established church and formed its own congregations. Its founder, Donatus, sought to establish churches with completely worthy presbyters and bishops.

35. Augustine, *Letter* 61.2, *Letters of Saint Augustine*, trans. J. G. Cunningham (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1872).

36. Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans* 10.6, trans. and ed., R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

37. Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, trans. Charles E. Hay (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1952), 1:268–71.

38. Gregory, *Book of Morals* 30.6; *Homilies on the Gospel* 2.26.5–6, NPNF 2nd series, vol. 12.

39. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, s.v., “St. Gregory I.”

40. González, *The Story of Christianity*, I:286–91.

41. Stephen Runciman, *A History of the Crusades* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 1:92–96. By the time of the second crusade, indulgences (remission of all purgatory) were being used as a means of securing troops.

42. González, *The Story of Christianity*, 1:307–11.

43. Giles of Rome, *On Ecclesiastical Power*, quoted in Evart Lewis, *Medieval Political Ideals* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1954), 2:363.

44. Boniface VIII, *Unam Sanctum*, quoted in Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 127.

45. Barbara W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1984), 51–126.

46. Martin Luther, *Address to the German Nobility*, Luther's Works, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 44:129.

47. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. R. Kolb and T. J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 222.1.

48. Martin Luther, "That a Christian Assembly or Congregation Has the Right and Power to Judge All Teaching and to Call, Appoint, and Dismiss Teachers, Established and Proved by Scripture," *Church and Ministry, Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 39:312.

49. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1089.

50. Eric W. Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 109–10.

51. The role of the bishops differs in various countries where Lutheranism has planted itself, with them exercising greater authority over local churches in some places and less in others. Karsten Nissen, "Whither Lutheranism? Lutheran Churches in Western Europe," *Word and World* 11 (1991) 3:253.

52. Zwingli used the word *bishop* synonymously with *pastor* and *teacher.* W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldreich Zwingli* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 274–81.

53. Timothy George, *The Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988), 134.

54. Norman Sykes, *Old Priest and New Presbyter: Episcopacy and Presbyterianism since the Reformation with Especial Relation to the Churches of England and Scotland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 53–55.

55. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.3.4–8.

56. George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 240.

57. Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 111–14.

58. Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.3.8. See also his discussion in John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Epistle to Timothy*, trans. William Pringle, Calvin's Commentaries, vol. 21 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979, reprint edition), 138.

59. Presbyterianism would have a rocky road in Scotland, however. A helpful survey of these events can be found in James Kirk, "Presbyterianism," in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron, David F. Wright, David C. Lachman, Donald E. Meek (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 673–76.

60. William Cunningham, *Historical Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960), 1:57–58.

61. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932), 581–92.

62. See his discussion also in Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Church*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 896–904.

63. Alison Weir, *Henry VIII: The King and His Court* (New York: Ballantine, 2001), 347–54.

64. Thomas Erastus (1524–1583) argued that the state had the right to oversee the church, and ought to do so. This would prevent the church from being heavy-handed with civil sanctions in excommunication. Paul Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1982), 142–44.

65. Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, quoted in Paul Avis, *Anglicanism and the Christian Church*, rev. ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2002), 58.

66. Avis, *Anglicanism*, 345.

67. Ibid., 45.

68. George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 285.

69. Ibid., 265–94. Many of the Radical Reformers believed that true Christians could not even be officers of the state.

70. The importance of orthodox convictions on fundamental issues historically for the Baptists is presented in L. Russ Bush and Tom J. Nettles,

Baptists and the Bible, revised and expanded edition (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), and a contemporary reaffirmation of this can be found in R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "Being Baptist Means Conviction," in *Why I Am a Baptist*, ed. Russell D. Moore and Tom J. Nettles (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 58–64.

71. The earliest English Baptists held to views on salvation which were generally inclined toward Arminianism, but within a couple of decades a more Reformed group arose and quickly became numerically dominant.

72. William G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1967), 110–92.

73. James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (North Richland Hills, Tex.: Bibal Press, 2001), 2:644; see also R. Stanton Norman, *More than Just a Name: Preserving Our Baptist Identity* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 120–27.

74. Later some British Baptists did move in the direction of a kind of Episcopacy, with the appointment in 1912 of superintendents in the Baptist Union, but this is in contrast to the majority tradition in the Baptist heritage. H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 501–502.

75. See the argument in J. R. Graves, *Old Landmarkism: What Is It?* (Memphis: Baptist Book House, 1880).

76. See for instance the discussion in Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1091; James L. Sullivan, *Baptist Polity—As I See It*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 45–101.

77. Wayne Grudem lists five different kinds of Congregationalism in his survey. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 928–36.

78. See the three essays in this book by Garrett, Akin, and White.

79. Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 1–26.

80. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1081.

81. The Church of God, Anderson, Indiana, and the Church of the Nazarene are classic examples of Holiness churches that retained the Methodist ecclesiology. The Church of God, Cleveland, Tennessee is an example of a Pentecostal denomination that is Episcopal in its basic orientation. See the

discussion in Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Abingdon, 1957); Melvin Easterday Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1980); Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

82. Edith L. Blumhofer, *The Assemblies of God: A Chapter in the Story of American Pentecostalism, Volume I—to 1941* (Springfield, Mo.: Gospel Publishing House, 1989), 202–205.

Chapter 1

1. Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, trans. Frank Clarke (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1961), 13.

2. For a summary of these positions, see Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 1080–94; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 923–36; Leon Morris, "Church Government," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 256–58. Hannah helps us put things in perspective when he writes, "While all expressions of the church today mirror some continuity with the apostolic church, they all evidence significant discontinuities as well. For example, in the area of church structure, various ecclesiastical traditions, whether they be episcopalian, presbyterian, or congregational, claim biblical warrant for their structures yet each as evolved forms (some more elaborately than others) that do not possess clear biblical justification. Often a particular ecclesiology has emerged out of a particular historic setting and meets the needs of the time. While it may be argued that one form or another more faithfully reflects the Bible, each evidences modification and change from the embryonic structure portrayed in the New Testament." See John D. Hannah, *Our Legacy* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2001), 12.

3. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1094.

4. Robert Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1927), 114.

5. John MacArthur, *The Master's Plan for the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 236.

6. D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 402–403.

7. Ibid., 403.

8. Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton: Crossways, 2000), 207. Calvin's exegesis is flawed when he equates the church in v. 17 with the elders who held the power of excommunication and locates that power in a spiritual/secular sphere, e.g., initially the Sanhedrin, and later even heathen nations. His prior theological commitments simply prevent him from seeing the plain meaning of the text. John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Mark and Luke* (2nd vol.), trans. Rev. William Pringle, vol. XVI, Calvin's Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Baker, rprt. 1996), 356–57.

9. F. F. Bruce, *Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 130.

10. John Stott, *The Spirit, The Church, and the World* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990), 121.

11. Acts 13:1–3 says that God revealed to certain prophets and teachers his will for Barnabas and Saul to be sent out "for the work to which I have called them" (v. 2 NKJV). God's revealing his purpose in this manner does not support any particular form of church polity. Acts 14:27 would certainly imply the whole church was in agreement in sending them out, just as the whole church came together to hear from them when they returned.

12. There is a textual issue related to this phrase. Some translations, such as the NASB, read "The apostles and the brethren, who are elders," or something similar. I have followed the NKJV, believing it better reflects the overall context.

13. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, 116.

14. Dever, *Nine Marks*, 209.

15. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 206. Fee goes on to state, "In this text church discipline is not the affair of one or a few. Even though Paul as an apostle pronounced the sentence prophetically, the sin itself was known by all and had contaminated the whole; so the action was to be the affair of all" (214).

16. In 2 Corinthians 8:8 it is important to note that Paul says to the Corinthians, concerning this offering, that "I am not commanding you" and in 8:10 he says, "Here is my advice" (NIV). Even though he is an apostle, Paul only suggests that they participate in the offering for the Jerusalem church.

17. Colin Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 81–82.

18. David Garland, *2 Corinthians*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 125.

19. Reformers such as Luther affirmed two marks of the church: (1) the Word rightly preached and (2) the sacraments (ordinances) rightly administered.

20. Philippians 1:1 is addressed to “all the saints...with the bishops and deacons.” Personal correspondences are addressed to Timothy and Titus (apostolic representatives), Philemon and Gaius (3 John). However, there can be little doubt each letter was intended to go beyond the initial recipient to the wider body of believers.

21. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, 116.

22. Dever, *Nine Marks*, 208.

23. D. A. Carson, “Church, Authority in the,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 249.

24. Timothy George, “The Priesthood of All Believers and the Quest for Theological Integrity,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3.2 (1989), 285. This section on the priesthood of all believers is indebted to this fine article by George and draws significantly from it.

25. Ibid., 287.

26. Ibid., 291.

27. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 314. Quoted in George, 292.

28. Carson, “Church Authority,” 251.

29. Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), 203.

30. J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 297.

31. Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 66.

32. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1097. Clowney, *The Church*, also says, “The governing of the church is a shared responsibility....Without the support of the whole body, the work of those with greater gifts for leadership would not be effective, or even possible. We submit to the authority of others while exercising our own” (205).

33. Those who hold this view include J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (London: MacMillan, 1981), 95–99; Charles Gore, *The Church and the Ministry*, 4th rev. ed. (London: Longmans, Green, 1900), 368; Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (London: SCM, 1955), 2:102; Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, trans. Frank Clark, SBT 32 (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1961), 85 [6h]; Myles M. Bourke, "Reflections on Church Order in the New Testament," CBQ 30 (1968): 506; Patrick Burke, "The Monarchical Episcopate at the End of the First Century," *JES 7* (1970): 514; Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John R. de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 457; D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 364; E. Earle Ellis, *Pauline Theology: Ministry and Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 103; George Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 1992), 175–77; William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC, vol. 46 (Nashville: Nelson, 2000), 161–63.

34. Jerome, *Letter 69.3*, trans. W. H. Fremantle with the assistance of G. Lewis and W. G. Martley under the title *The Principal Works of St. Jerome, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6, 2nd series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 143. Lightfoot adds, "But, though more full than other writers, [Jerome] is hardly more explicit. Of his predecessors the Ambrosian Hilary had discerned the same truth. Of his contemporaries and successors, Chrysostom, Pelagius, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret, all acknowledge it. Thus in every one of the extant commentaries on the epistles containing the crucial passages, whether Greek or Latin, before the close of the fifth century, this identity is affirmed" (*Philippians*, 99).

35. Lothar Coenen, "Bishop, Presbyter, Elder," *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 193–97; Cornelis Van Dam, "Elder," *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 197–98; David Mappes, "The 'Elder' in the Old and New Testaments," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (1997), 80–84.

36. R. Alistair Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity, Studies of the New Testament and Its World* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 22.

37. Ibid., 27.

38. See esp. *m. Sanh.* 1:6. Cf. also *m. Sanh.* 1:5; 2:4; *m. Shebu* 2:2.

39. John L. McKenzie, “Elders in the Old Testament,” *Bib* 40 (1959), 523–26.

40. Mappes, “The ‘Elder’ in the Old and New Testaments,” 82.

41. Campbell, *Elders*, 21. Davies agrees and adds, “As parents wield authority in a family, so the elders wield authority in the life of the clan, tribe, or local community” (G. Henton Davies, “Elder in the OT,” *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick [Nashville: Abingdon, 1962], 2:72).

42. See David W. Miller, “The Uniqueness of New Testament Church Eldership,” *Grace Theological Journal* 6 (1985); 315–27; also Mappes, 85–92.

43. Mappes believes the concept of elder includes both office and function. I agree, though I am still convinced the emphasis is on function. See David Mappes, “The New Testament Elder, Overseer, and Pastor,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (1997), 169–70.

44. These positions are summarized well in the fine work by Benjamin L. Merkle. “The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church.” (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2000), 75–78. Much of my discussion in this section is significantly dependent on and guided by Merkle.

45. Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, 3rd ed., rev. and exp. (Littleton, Colo.: Lewis & Roth, 1995), 143. Marshall adds, “The picture that emerges from relevant passages (Phil. 1:1; Acts 20:17, 28; 14:23; 16:4) suggests a plurality of leaders in a church” (I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, in collaboration with Philip H. Towner [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1999], 153).

46. Campbell, *Elders*, 172.

47. Quoted in John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 31.

48. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 167–68.

49. Warren Wiersbe, *Be Faithful* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1988), 41.

50. Martin Luther, “A Treatise on Christian Liberty,” *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1947), 23.

51. See Daniel L. Akin, “Overseer,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 586–87.

52. D. Edmond Hiebert, “Counsel for Christ's Under-Shepherds: An

Exposition of 1 Peter 5:1–4,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Oct.-Dec. 1982), 334.

53. Ibid., 335.

54. Bruce says, “A bishop, according to 1 Timothy 3:2, should be ‘an apt teacher.’ Teaching is an essential part of the pastoral ministry; it is appropriate, therefore, that the two terms, ‘pastors and teachers,’ should be joined together to denote one order of ministry.” See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 348.

55. MacArthur, *The Master's Plan for the Church*, 185. Also see the fine treatment on church leaders in Tom R. Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God's Glory* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 383–95.

56. Merkle, “Elder and Overseer,” 121.

57. Ibid., 19–24. Merkle points out that “those who hold this view usually date the Pastorals to the second century” (19).

58. Merkle, “Elder and Overseer,” 178–88. Mappes, “The New Testament Elder, Overseer, and Pastor,” 162–69.

59. Quotations from Ignatius are from J. B. Lightfoot, J. R. Harmer, and Michael W. Holmes, eds., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Text and English Translations of Their Writings*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992). Also see Ign. *Eph.* 2:2; 4:1; Ign. *Magn.* 2:1; 13:1; Ign. *Trall.* 2:2–3; 7:2; Ign. *Phld.* 4:1; 7:1; Ign. *Smyrn.* 8:1; 12:2; Ign. *Pol.* 6:1.

60. Merkle, “Elder annd Overseer,” 181.

61. Mounce is correct when he writes, “Timothy and Titus are never pictured as the bishops of the Ephesian and Cretan churches (neither the title nor the function is ever applied to them). They are apostolic delegates, exercising Paul's authority over the churches, standing outside the formal structure of the church” (*Pastoral Epistles*, 187).

62. Merkle, “Elder annd Overseer,” 182–83.

63. Rodney J. Decker, “Polity and the Elder Issue,” *Grace Theological Journal* 9.2 (1988), 275. This is an excellent article overall in defense of Congregational polity.

64. Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 233. Mounce has an extensive discussion of this text and carefully examines several interpretations. He likewise affirms that only a single office is in view (*Pastoral Epistles*, 308).

65. See John H. Armstrong, *The Stain That Stays* (Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2000); Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Integrity Crisis* (Nashville: Nelson, 1988, 1991).

66. Greg Wills, "The Church: Baptists and Their Churches in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries," in *Polity: A Collection of Historic Baptist Documents*, ed. Mark E. Dever (Washington D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 21.

67. Ibid., 34.

68. Ibid.

69. W. B. Johnson, *The Gospel Developed Through the Government and Order of the Churches of Jesus Christ* (Richmond, 1846), in *Polity*, 243–44.

70. Ibid., 189–194.

71. W. L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge: Judson, 1969), 365–66.

72. Jerry Sutton, *The Baptist Reformation* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 427.

73. The five are Dagg, Boyce, Mullins, Conner, and Moody (Sutton, *Baptist Reformation*, 432).

74. Dever, *Nine Marks*, 212.

75. W. E. Vine, *The Church and the Churches*, 10–11, quoted in J. B. Nicholson, Jr., "The Headship of Christ," *Uplook* (March 2001), 25.

76. How the church in Jerusalem could have done this is impossible to imagine, given that they began with three thousand converts on Pentecost (Acts 2:40–47). While many of these converts lived outside of Jerusalem (Acts 2:9–11), a large number must have resided in the city.

77. Carson, "Church Authority," 250. Fee also states, "It is therefore altogether likely, based both on the evidence of 2 Timothy 3:6–7 (the FT [False Teachers] making their way into houses) and of 1 Corinthians 16:19 (Aquila and Priscilla have a "house church" in Ephesus), that corporate life in the church in Ephesus was not experienced in a large Sunday gathering in a single sanctuary but in many house churches, each with its own elder(s)....What one can envision, therefore, on the basis of all the evidence is a scene in which the various house churches each had one or more elders" (144–45). Fee himself argues strongly for a plurality-of-elders position. Gordon D. Fee, "Reflections on Church Order in

the Pastoral Epistles, with Further Reflection on the Hermeneutics of *Ad Hoc* Documents," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28 (1985), 141–51.

78. Mark Dever, *A Display of God's Glory* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 23.

79. Methodists like Asbury and Cartwright actually pioneered this method of caring for churches on the American frontier. See "Circuit Rider," "Francis Asbury" and "Peter Cartwright" in J. D. Douglas, ed. *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978); R. G. Tuttle, "Circuit Rider" in Daniel G. Reid, ed., *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990), 280–81.

80. MacArthur, *The Master's Plan for the Church*, 88.

81. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 149.

82. See the discussion of this in Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 245–49.

83. Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 218.

84. Carson, "Church Authority," 250.

85. See Thom Rainer, *Effective Evangelistic Churches* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996); idem, *High Expectations* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999); and especially idem, *Surprising Insights from the Unchurched* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

86. Clowney, *The Church*, 202.

87. Sam Thorpe, "Seven Bright Ideas: Ways I Can Help My Elders," *Uplook* (March 2001), 9–10.

88. See James Leo Garrett Jr., "The Biblical Doctrine of the Priesthood of the People of God," in *New Testament Studies: Essays in Honor of Ray Summers in His Sixty-Fifth Year*, ed. Huber L. Drumwright, Jr. and Curtis Vaughan (Waco, Tex.: Markham Press Fund of Baylor University Press, 1975), 137–43.

89. See my *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, 2d ed. (North Richland Hills, Tex.: Bibal Press, 2001), 2:616–18.

90. Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 3–8, 72–81; Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), 79–86.

91. The fourth century would seem to be the latest possible date, since the whole of the *Didache* was incorporated by the author of *Apostolic Constitutions*

(7:1–32) (AD 375). I still find impressive the argument by F. E. Vokes, *The Riddle of the Didache* (London: S.P.C.K., 1938), 140, that the *Didache* came out of a Montanist setting (cf. fasting, apocalypse, prophets) at the end of the second century.

92. Vokes, *The Riddle of the Didache*, 7.

93. "Baptist Elders in America in the 1700's: Documents and Evaluation," *The Quarterly Review* 50 (October 1989): 57–65.

94. "Southern Baptists and Elder Rule," Part III, "Elders in the Baptist Tradition," *The Oklahoma Baptist Chronicle* 37 (Autumn 1994): 17–32.

95. Many members of the Constitutional Convention split their time shuttling back and forth between the Constitutional Convention and the General Assembly that was meeting synchronously in Philadelphia.

96. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 815.

Chapter 2

1. George W. Knight III, "Church Government," *Written for Our Instruction: The Sufficiency of Scripture for All of Life*, ed. Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., and J. Andrew Wortman (Taylors, S.C.: Southern Presbyterian Press, 2001), 89. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (Reprint of 1869 edition; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960), II, 201–13, responded to this same attitude in his day.

2. See, for example, Gordon D. Fee, "Reflections on Church Order in the Pastoral Epistles, with Further Reflections on the Hermeneutics of *Ad Hoc* Documents," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28 (1985): 141–51.

3. See George W. Knight III, "The Scriptures Were Written for Our Instruction," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39/1 (March 1996): 3–13.

4. Ibid., 12.

5. Knight, "Church Government," *Written for Our Instruction: The Sufficiency of Scripture for All of Life*, 90 (emphasis added).

6. Throughout this chapter I am presupposing the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles.

7. John Murray, "Government in the Church of Christ," in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 1:265 (emphasis added).

8. The twenty-four elders in John's Revelation are most likely an angelic order that adores and serves God. Therefore, their eldership is not relevant to this chapter's concern.

9. In a strange etymological twist *presbyteros* is the root of our English word “priest”—strange, I say, because historically Presbyterian churches would be among the last in the world to represent their officeholders as “priests,” although they happily acknowledge their “priestly duty [*hierourgounta*] of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 15:16). Charles Hodge correctly observes in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (reprint of revised 1886 edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 439 (emphasis added):

> In this beautiful passage we see the nature of the only priesthood which belongs to the Christian ministry. It is not their office to make atonement for sin, or to offer a propitiatory sacrifice to God, but by the preaching of the gospel to bring men, by the influence of the Holy Spirit, to offer themselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. It is well worthy of remark, that amid the numerous designations of the ministers of the gospel in the New Testament, intended to set forth the nature of their office, they are never officially called priests. *This is the only passage in which the term is even figuratively applied to them*, and that under circumstances which render its misapprehension impossible. They are not mediators between God and man; they do not offer propitiatory sacrifices. Their only priesthood, as Theophylact says, is the preaching of the gospel,...and their offerings are redeemed and sanctified men, saved by their instrumentality.

10. The Greek word *episkopēs* in 1 Timothy 3:1 means “office of overseer [or “of oversight”].” Paul describes this office as a “good work” (*kalou ergou*) that Christian men should desire to occupy.

11. Paul's uniting of the elder's shepherd role and his oversight role here (as does Peter in 2 Peter 5:2, according to many manuscripts) is strikingly paralleled in 1 Peter 2:25 where Christ is described as the shepherd (*poimena*) and overseer (*episkopon*) of souls.

12. The Greek preposition *kata*, in the phrase *kata polin*, is used in the distributive sense to mean “in every [single] city” or “city by city” (see *kata*, in BAGD, II.1.d; see the same distributive use of *kata*, in Acts 14:23: “in every church,” *kat' ekklēsian*).

13. In First Peter 5:1–2 Peter writes: “To elders [*presbyterous*] among you I

appeal...: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, *serving as overseers* [episkopountes].” The participle *episkopountes* is a variant reading here. The UBS *Greek New Testament* (4th rev. ed.) places it in the text but within square brackets indicating some doubt on the part of the committee about its genuineness, absent as it is Å* B 33 although present in P72. Å2. and most other witnesses. The very fact that many manuscripts include it gives evidence that at least many, if not most or all, adult Christians in the early church believed that “elders” were also “overseers.”

14. J. B. Lightfoot, “The synonyms ‘bishop’ and ‘presbyter,’” in *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (reprint of 1913 edition; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953), 95–99. (Both this article and his “The Christian Ministry,” also in this same volume, 181–269, are still generally valid and quite useful.) See also Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, II, 274–76, who argues similarly. Today this position is a commonplace among orthodox theologians; see, e.g., A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1907), 914–15; L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (combined edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 585–86; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 914–15.

15. *Cheirotonesantes*, from the verb *cheirotoneo*, literally means “choose, elect by raised hands” and by extension can refer to the act of ordination by the laying on of hands (see BAGD, 881). The action described here probably means that Paul as an apostle ordained elders when he first planted a church just as missionaries must often do today when they first plant a church.

16. *Katasteses*, from the verb *kathistemi*, means simply “to appoint” and in some contexts possibly “to ordain” (see BAGD, 390, 2.b).

17. Edmund P. Clowney, “Presbyterianism,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1988), 530.

18. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 584.

19. While Christian men and women both bear the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27) and both are heirs together of the grace of life (1 Pet. 3:7), only men are to be elected to the offices of elder and deacon in Christ's church. This is evident from the following data:

Elder: First, Paul expressly forbids women to teach or to exercise authority over men; rather, they are to be quiet in the churches (1 Tim. 2:12; 1 Cor. 14:33b–36). Since elders are to carry out these very functions, women

necessarily are prohibited from holding this office. Second, the lists of qualifications for the elder in both 1 Timothy 3:2–7 and Titus 1:6–9 assume that elders are going to be men: an elder must be “a man of one woman” (*mias gynaikos andra*) and “must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect.” Third, with only rare exceptions under unusual circumstances (e.g., Deborah and Huldah; see Judg. 4–5 and 2 Kgs. 22:14–20), there is a consistent pattern of male leadership among God's people throughout the entire Bible. Jesus himself appointed only men as his apostles. A church that would ordain a woman to the eldership is flying in the face, not only of general church history, but of the consistent testimony of Scripture opposing such an action.

Deacon: First, when the problem of the equitable distribution of food to widows arose in the early church, the apostles expressly directed the church to choose seven men (*andras*) to oversee the distribution of food (Acts 6:1–6). Second, like the elder's lists of qualifications, Paul's list of qualifications for the deacon in 1 Timothy 3:8–13 assumes that the deacon is going to a man: he too is to be “a man of one woman” and “must manage his children and his household well” (1 Tim. 3:12).

See George W. Knight III, *The Role Relationship of Men and Women* (rev. ed.; Chicago: Moody, 1985) and *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), chapters 9 and 20 for the full argument.

20. F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 148.

21. See Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, II, 321–25, for his extended argument for the fact of the “Jerusalem presbytery.”

22. For reasons that will become clear from my discussion I must take exception to the statement by Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (combined edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 591: “Acts 15 acquaints us with the example of the council of Jerusalem. This council was composed of apostles and elders, and therefore [does] not constitute a proper example and pattern of a classis [or presbytery] or synod [or general assembly] in the modern sense of the word.”

23. Never did Moses teach that circumcision was essential to salvation. Related as circumcision was to the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17:10–14), it was the sign and seal of “the righteousness that [Abraham] had by faith while he was still uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:11). Moses understood this (Rom. 10:5–8); the

Judaizers did not.

24. I say “and experiential grounds” here because Barnabas and Paul would later argue at the Jerusalem assembly that God himself had borne witness to the Gentiles' salvation through faith in Christ apart from works of law by “the miraculous signs and wonders [he] had done among the Gentiles through them” (Acts 15:12).

25. I infer from the fact that the Judaizers were so overt with their teaching before the leaders of the Jerusalem church that they apparently believed that the Jewish Christian leadership in Jerusalem supported their view as well. All the more likely may this have been their thinking if the Judaizers were interpreting in their own (incorrect) way such Jacobean teaching as may be found, for example, in James 2:14–26 which had been penned by this time. See my *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 748–50, where I argue that the accent in James 2:14–26 falls not upon a justifying character of good works but upon the *probative* character of good works, such works being the fruit and evidence of a living, justifying faith.

26. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 306. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 282, describes the Acts 15 assembly as “an event to which Luke attaches the highest importance; it is as epoch-making, in his eyes, as the conversion of Paul or the preaching of the gospel to Cornelius and his household.” I concur with Brown's and Bruce's assessments, for Luke, devoting as much space and detail as he did to this single meeting in his short “history” of Christianity, obviously regarded the outcome of this “general assembly” as extremely significant to the progress of Paul's law-free gospel. Without its official conciliar declaration that Gentiles did not have to become Jewish proselytes in order to become Christians, Christianity would have been doomed to extinction as a world religion, but with its conciliar declaration Christianity continued its march toward becoming the world religion that it has become. The church at large stands indebted to Paul and the Antioch presbytery for insisting on this historic assembly and for the part Paul personally played in it.

27. James cited here a version of Amos 9:11–12 which reflects more closely the Septuagint version than the present-day Massoretic Text. The latter can and probably should be emended in the following ways to conform to the Hebrew text which doubtless underlay James's cited Septuagint translation:

1. In 9:12 the verb “possess” should be emended to “seek”—the change of the yodh to the daleth.
2. The sign of the accusative *'eth*—clearly suspect as an indicator that “remnant of Edom and all the Gentiles …” are direct objects inasmuch as a single *'eth* never introduces two direct objects—should be emended to *othi* “me,” referring to the Lord, or “the Lord,” construing the yodh as a hypocoristic abbreviation for [weh] *yodh he*).
3. The proper noun “Edom” should be emended to “adham” (“men”), a mere repointing of the word.

What is the result of these slight emendations? Instead of reading, “that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the Gentiles who bear my name,” the text now reads, “that the remnant of men, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, may seek the Lord,” precisely the words Luke quotes James as saying.

Because some dispensational scholars have maintained that “dispensationally, [James's summary speech] is the most important passage in the N.T.,” describing, they say, the final regathering of Israel into the reestablished Davidic kingdom *after* this present age (see *Scofield Reference Bible* [New York: Oxford, 1917], 1169–70), they have insisted that the verb *symphonousin*, in Acts 15:15 has the connotation, “are in agreement with,” not “speak about,” and simply indicates that the missionary policies being observed in connection with Gentile evangelism in the present age are harmonious with the policies that will be followed in the future Jewish kingdom age—the real referent of Amos's prophecy.

Aside from the fact that such an interpretation imposes an inanity on the text since the Jerusalem assembly hardly needed to be informed that God's prescribed missionary policies throughout history are consistent with each other from age to age, this is a classic example of theological “reaching” in order to avoid the obvious. If there is no connection between the cited “words of the [Old Testament] prophets” and the missionary activity of this present age beyond the mere fact that the character of the church's present missionary activity among the Gentiles “fits with” the character of Jewish missionary activity among the Gentiles in the reputed future millennial age, one is left with no acceptable explanation for James's citation of the Amos prophecy in this context. In fact, by this line of reasoning James is made to introduce an irrelevancy on the issue before the assembly.

28. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 295, fn. 60.

29. Richard Longenecker, *The Ministry and Message of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 56.

30. I have provided my own translation of the first part of this "decree" because I believe the NIV misleads when it suggests by its translation that it was the going out of these Judaizers and not what they said which was not authorized. But Paul distinctly states that these men were "from James," and therefore we must acknowledge and work with the fact that James had commissioned them to go to Antioch. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 296–97, it appears, would agree with me, for he translates 15:24 as follows: "We have heard that some of our people have confused you with their arguments, upsetting your minds, although we gave them no such directions."

31. The Greek literally says: "For *it seemed* [*edoxen*] good to the Holy Spirit and to us." It is certainly evident that their conclusions "seemed good" to the assembly delegates themselves, but how did they know that their conclusions "seemed good" to the Holy Spirit as well? Obviously, because the speeches at the assembly had made it abundantly clear to those there that the Holy Spirit had placed his divine *imprimatur* upon the conclusions they had reached. The Spirit's endorsement of their conclusions may be seen in his threefold, collectively incontrovertible, objective involvement in (1) the conversion of the uncircumcised Cornelius and all the other Gentiles who had heard Peter's sermon on that occasion (see Acts 10:19, 44–47), to which Peter later referred both in Jerusalem and then at the assembly (11:12, 15–17; 15:8); (2) the Spirit-mandated (13:1) and Spirit-validated ministry of Barnabas and Paul (13:9 [see Gal. 3:5]; 14:27; 15:3) and their later evidentiary description at the assembly of his validation of their ministry by the signs and wonders (*semeia kai terata*) that he had empowered them to perform among the Gentiles (15:12); and (3) the Spirit-inspired Scripture of Amos 9:11–12, which James cited, which prophetically endorsed the mission activities of Peter in the Cornelius incident and of Barnabas and Paul among the Gentiles (15:13–19).

32. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), 429–34, for full discussion of the debate over whether the decree entailed a twofold or threefold stipulation (Western text) or a fourfold stipulation (Alexandrian text). All things considered, it appears best to settle for the fourfold stipulation as reflected in the above account, but it should be recognized that the three dietary regulations may be reduced to two inasmuch as "strangled meat" would have been a specific type of meat which had not been drained of its blood.

33. In the same way today ministers of the gospel must often contend among themselves for the truth as they understand it even if it means some loss of tranquility for a time among them. If they are truly desirous of knowing the truth, the Spirit of God in the church will guide them to the truth (see John 7:17; 1 Cor. 11:19) that is often to be lived out on a razor-thin *via media* between two opposing extremes.

34. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts,* 285, emphasis added.

35. Ibid., 305, fn. 13. See A. S. Geyser, "Paul, the Apostolic Decree and the Liberals in Corinth," in *Studia Paulina in honorem J. deZwaan*, ed. J. N. Sevenster and W. C. van Unnik (Haarlem, 1953), 124ff.

36. I must demur here. While it is true that Paul states in Galatians 6:15 that "neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything" as far as one's actual salvation is concerned, yet in light of what he says in Romans 4:11, namely, that "the sign of circumcision" is "a seal of the righteousness that [Abraham] had by faith while he was still uncircumcised," and that as such, that is, as the sign of the Abrahamic covenant, circumcision "has value if you observe the law" (Rom. 2:25a), it is apparent that for Paul circumcision involved more than simply "the presence or absence of a piece of skin."

37. R. H. Stein, "Jerusalem," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993), 471.

38. Richard Longenecker, *The Ministry and Message of Paul*, 56.

39. Martin Franzmann, *The Word of the Lord Grows* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1961), 52.

40. I say "acting as elders in the church" here because there is no indication anywhere in Luke's account of the assembly's proceedings that Peter or Paul "pulled rank" on the assembly and appealed to their apostolic authority *per se*, which they could have done, to settle the case for the church. Rather, Luke portrays the assembly as a "deliberative" body. Bannerman also notes that "the language of the letter is the very language appropriate to the case of men who were not decreeing anything by their own authority, but ministerially declaring and interpreting the mind of the Holy Ghost as expressed in Scripture, to the effect that no ceremonial observance of the Mosaic law was necessary to salvation" (*The Church of Christ*, II, 327). John Murray, "The Government of the Church," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 2:344, observes with respect to this joint deliberation of apostles and elders: "It is all the more striking that the church should resort to such deliberation, and to this method of resolving an

issue, since it was the era of special revelation....There is provided for us [here] a pattern of consultation and adjudication that cannot be neglected in the permanent government of the church."

41. I think the letter is wrongly designated as the "Apostolic Decree," for it is too restrictive with regard to the letter's senders (see the letter's salutation in Acts 15:23, "The apostles and elders, your brothers," which salutation underscores the fact that the assembly decision was not a deliverance issued by inspired apostles but a deliverance reached by Spirit-guided men in a deliberative assembly).

42. Clearly the unity among Christians for which our Lord prayed is to be a *visible* unity if, as he prayed, the *world* is to learn from it that the Father had sent him. Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *The Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 45, rightly states that "the Church may not be viewed as a hidden, mystical mysterious present reality full of inner richness, which the world cannot perceive....To flee here to the continuing sinfulness of the Church as an 'explanation' of her disunity or into the reassurance that a hidden unity can survive in the division does not take Christ's prayer seriously....Because of her function and purpose in relating salvation to the world, one cannot boast here of a solidarity that is sufficient in God's eyes, but one must think of the eyes of the world."

43. The plural *ekklesiai* also occurs as a variant to the singular, *ekklēsia*, in Acts 9:31. Supported by the many good textual witnesses it has, the singular seems to be the superior reading, probably having been altered to the plural in order to conform to the two occurrences in Acts 15:41 and 16:5.

44. F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 321.

45. Lightfoot, "The synonyms 'bishop' and 'presbyter,'" in *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, 98.

46. Lightfoot, "The Christian Ministry," in *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, 240. See also Joseph H. Hall, "History and Character of Church Government," *Paradigms in Polity: Classic Readings in Reformed and Presbyterian Church Government*, edited by David W. Hall and Joseph H. Hall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 3–11.

47. See Robert L. Reymond, *The Reformation's Conflict with Rome: Why It Must Continue* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2001), 67–85.

48. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 558.

49. See Cyprian's treatise, *The Unity of the Church*, and his *Epistles*, 73.21.

50. Another characteristic of Presbyterian church bodies since the time of the Reformation, with very rare exception (such as the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in Tennessee), is their historic commitment to Reformed theology as delineated in Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (hence they are often called “Calvinistic” churches) and creedally expressed in the national Reformed creeds, particularly the Belgic Confession, the Canons of the Synod of Dordt, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms. Our present purpose is to explicate Presbyterian church government and not its theology, so I will only say here that in the Presbyterian church bodies that are still orthodox, great emphasis is placed on God's sovereignty over all of life, including the salvation of man, and on the unity of the covenant of grace throughout history and the oneness of the people of God in all ages. Its theology has often been represented by the T-U-L-I-P acronym: T—the “total depravity” of mankind as a result of Adam's fall; U—God's “unconditional election” of some to salvation; L—Christ's “limited [that is, definite] atonement,” that is to say, Christ carried out his saving work for particular people (the “elect”) in every walk of life and in every nation of the world and not for the mass of mankind; I—God's “irresistible grace” which in his own time draws all of his elect to saving faith in Christ; P—the “perseverance of the saints” in holiness until they either die or (in the case of the last generation of Christians) until Jesus returns to earth. But while these “five points of Calvinism” are true as far as they go, they hardly capture the Reformed theology in its rich fullness.

51. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill and translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.3–7. Of Calvin's contribution to the freedom from state constraints that modern-day churches have, Benjamin B. Warfield writes:

> Every Church in Protestant Christendom which enjoys today any liberty whatever, in performing its functions as a Church of Jesus Christ, owes it all to John Calvin. It was he who first asserted this liberty in his early manhood...; it was he who first gained it in a lifelong struggle against a determined opposition; it was he who taught his followers to value it above life itself, and to secure it to their successors with the outpouring of their blood. And thus Calvin's great figure rises before us as not only in a true sense the creator of the Protestant Church, but the author of all the freedom it exercises in its spiritual sphere.

See Benjamin B. Warfield, “John Calvin: The Man and His Work,” *The Works of*

Benjamin B. Warfield, rep. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), V:19.

52. When news of the "extraordinary proceedings" surrounding the American revolution reached England, Horace Walpole rose from his seat in the British House of Commons and said: "There is no good crying about the matter. Cousin America has run off with a Presbyterian parson [John Witherspoon], and that is the end of it." At the time of the Revolutionary War an estimated three million people lived in the colonies, of which number 900,000 were of Scotch or Scotch-Irish origin, 600,000 were Puritan English, while 400,000 were of Dutch, German Reformed, and Huguenot descent. This means that roughly two-thirds of America's Revolutionary forefathers had been trained in the school of Calvin, with more than one-half of all the officers and soldiers of the American army during the Revolution being Presbyterians. This is the reason such historians as Leopold von Ranke and Merle D'Aubigne say that through his followers Calvin was the virtual founder of America.

53. This preface has been retained, with only slight alteration, in the *Book of Church Order* of both the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA).

54. Under its official title, *The Form of Presbyterian Church-Government and of Ordination of Ministers*, it was agreed upon by the Westminster Assembly and was adopted by the General Assembly of the Kirk of Scotland on February 10, 1645.

55. I am indebted to George W. Knight III for the insights in the above two paragraphs.

56. George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 233.

57. Some larger Presbyterian church bodies place a graded level of courts designated "synods" between presbyteries and the general assembly.

58. John Murray wisely comments in "Government in the Church of Christ," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 1:262:

> While the [elders'] oversight is over the church, it is not over something from which the elders themselves are excluded. Elders are not lords over God's heritage; they are themselves of the flock and are to be examples to it. The Scripture has a unique way of emphasizing unity and diversity, and in this instance, the diversity which resides in the rule exercised is kept in proper proportion by the reminder that the elders themselves also are subject to the rule which they exercise over others.

Elders are members of the body of Christ and are subject to the very same kind of rule of which they are the administrators.

59. William Cunningham, *Historical Theology* (reprint of 1870 edition; London: Banner of Truth, 1960), I:57.

60. For his full description and defense of the Presbyterian system of church government, see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 581–92.

61. Samuel Rutherford, *The Due Right of Presbyteries, or, A Peaceable Plea for the Government of the Church of Scotland* (London: E. Griffin, for R. Whittaker and A. Crook, 1644), 383.

62. See Joseph H. Hall, "History and Character of Church Government," Thomas Witherow, "The Apostolic Church: Which Is It?," and "Earliest Textual Documentation," in *Paradigms in Polity*, 3–11, 35–52, 55–61, for bibliographic and biblical support respectively for early Presbyterianism.

63. See Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 156–57, for a chart correlating the two lists of qualifications.

64. This qualification (1 Tim. 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6; lit., "a man of one woman," *mias gunaikos andra*) has been variously interpreted. Some interpreters insist that its intent is to mandate that an officeholder in the church must be married. Others declare that it means that an officeholder can only be married once, that is to say, a man who has been widowed or divorced, even on biblical grounds, and then has remarried is not to hold office. Still others insist that this qualification is intended to prohibit a polygamist from holding church office. The best view, in my opinion, is that this qualification, though couched in monogamous marital terminology, requires of the elder fidelity to his marriage vows. See Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 157–59.

65. I have adapted these four points from John Murray, "Government in the Church of Christ," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 1:265–67.

66. See Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 171, for the argument that the *gunaikas*, in 1 Timothy 3:11 are deacons' wives. Edmund P. Clowney in his *The Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), basing his argument on Paul's description of Phoebe in Romans 16:1 as "*diakonon* ["servant, helper, 'deacon'"] of the church in Cenchrea," and on Paul's reference here to "women" (*gunaikas*), concludes that women may legitimately hold the office of deacon (231–35). Other scholars as well, such as C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986),

2:781, make the same case.

While I feel the force of their argument, I am not persuaded that these verses endorse the position that women may hold official diaconal office because Paul expressly states in 1 Timothy 3:12 that a deacon is to be a “husband” (*andres*) who is sexually and maritally faithful to his wife and who manages his children and his own household well. I believe that Phoebe was a godly “servant” and “helper” of the church in Cenchrea and that the women referred to in 1 Timothy 3:11 are best understood to be deacons' wives.

67. By his “serving” (*diakonian*) in Romans 12:7 and his “those able to help others” (*antilempseis*) in 1 Corinthians 12:28, Paul very likely intended to refer to deacons.

68. This body of elders/overseers included Paul himself (2 Tim. 1:6), which fact indicates that Paul regarded himself and was regarded by other elders/overseers as an elder/overseer in the church (see here 1 Pet. 5:1 in which verse Peter describes himself also as an elder/overseer *sumpresbyteros*).

69. So basic to church life in the New Testament age was the ordination and the commissioning of church officers by the laying on of hands by elders/overseers that the author of Hebrews designates the “laying on of hands” (*epithese_s cheir_n*) with its several entailments, which entailments surely included ordinations and commissionings, an aspect of “elementary Christian teaching” (*ton tes arches tou christou logon*) (Heb. 6:1–2).

A careful study of the New Testament will disclose that in the days of the apostles no elders/overseers, with the exception of the apostles themselves, ever served as such apart from their ordaining by the laying on of hands by a presbytery in the sense of 1 Timothy 4:14. Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, 422, concurs: “In the apostolic Church..., imposition of hands seems always to have accompanied ordination to office in the Church.” For one to claim today that he has been ordained as an elder/overseer *directly* from Christ apart from the authorizing act of ordination by a body of elders is to claim to be an apostle, to be another Paul. But this is to usurp the authority of Christ and to arrogate Christ's authority to oneself, and this is to become a *pseudapostolos*, that is, a *false* apostle.

70. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 175.

71. Presbyterian courts must bear in mind when they do so, however, the caution expressed by the Westminster Assembly: “Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to

intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be required by the civil magistrate" (*Westminster Confession of Faith,* XXXI.IV).

72. This means that the medieval church was wrong when it endorsed, under Innocent IV's bull, *Ad extirpanda* (1252), the use of torture to break the will of heretics and to extort recantations from them, and penalized the unrepentant with confiscation of goods, imprisonment, and their surrender to the "secular arm" which meant death at the stake. The Spanish Inquisition in 1479 under Ferdinand V and Isabella, in particular, was aimed at Jews, Muslims, and later Protestants, and under its first Grand Inquisitor, Tomas Torquemada, burned some two thousand people for heresy and expelled from the empire Jews who refused to be baptized. The church was wrong when it launched, for religious reasons, the Crusades (eight or nine in all) in the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries in order to recover the Holy Land from Islam. Martin Luther was wrong when in 1531 he called for the German princes to use the sword against the Anabaptists (see Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1950], 295–96). The Protestant leaders at Geneva, including John Calvin, were wrong when they burned Michael Servetus as a heretic. Still later, the English Reformers were wrong when, under Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Elizabeth I, they employed the secular authority to persecute Roman Catholics. And the theonomic reconstructionists of our day are equally wrong when they call upon the state to execute false prophets, witches, adulterers, and homosexuals.

73. David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 113; emphasis added.

74. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, 176–77.

75. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 581, writes in this regard: "Reformed Churches do not claim that their system of Church government is determined in every detail by the Word of God, but do assert that its fundamental principles are directly derived from Scripture. They do not claim a *jus divinum* for the details, but *only for the general fundamental principles of the system*, and are quite ready to admit that many of its particulars [such as the times of services, their length, how many hymns or psalms should be sung, etc.] are determined by expediency and human wisdom" (emphasis added).

Berkhof's statement accords precisely with *Westminster Confession of Faith*, I.VI, that states that "there are some circumstances concerning

the...government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word [such as Paul's assertion in 1 Corinthians 14:40: “Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way”], which are always to be observed.”

76. *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (reprint ed.: Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), appendix on “The Christian Ministry,” esp. 193.

77. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 1, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1994), 687.

78. *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, An American Commentary on the New Testament (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1882), 169.

79. *Acts*, vol. 26 in The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 319.

80. *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844), 27–28.

81. *Notes on the New Testament*, ed. Robert Frew, Acts (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 223.

82. Reymond (prior to fn. 56) concludes that “pastors” and “teachers” in Ephesians 4:11 constituted one office. Such a conclusion, which I would deem exegetically correct, tends to undermine Calvin's four distinctive offices.

83. According to Lightfoot, *The Christian Ministry*, 195, “there is no ground for supposing that the work of teaching and the work of governing pertained to separate members of the presbyterial college. As each had his special gifts, so would he devote himself more or less exclusively to the one or the other of these sacred functions.”

84. Joachim Jeremias and August Strobel, *Die Briefe an Timotheus und Titus* [und] *Der Brief an die Hebräer* [Jeremias re Tim. and Tit.] (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1981), 41–42; C. K. Barrett, *The Pastoral Epistles in the New English Bible*, The New Clarendon Bible (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 78–79; *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, 2 Corinthians-Philemon, 1–2 Timothy and Titus, by E. Glenn Hinson (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 330.

85. *First Apology* 67.4. The Greek is *ho proestes*; the English (Fathers of

the Church) is “the president”; the French (Études Augustiniennes) is “le président.”

86. TEV, NEB, JB, NIV, NAB, and REB.

Chapter 3

1. J. M. Pendleton, *Church Manual: Designed for the Use of Baptist Churches* (reprint ed.; Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1878), 101—17; *Baptist Church Manual* (Nashville: Broadman, 1966), 100–16; Edward T. Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1894), 143–44; H. E. Dana and L. M. Sipes, *A Manual of Ecclesiology*, 2d ed. (Kansas City, Kan.: Central Seminary Press, 1944), 144–49; Allen W. Graves, *A Church at Work: A Handbook of Church Polity* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1972), 37–40. E. C. Dargan, *Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches* (Louisville: Charles T. Dearing, 1897), 17–24, differentiated from the Congregationalism of Baptists those whose polity was based on either “church authority,” “expediency,” or argument from the Scriptures.

2. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Power, Ordinances, Discipline, and Government of the Christian Church*, 2 vols. (rpt. ed.: London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960; orig. publ. 1868), 2:245–331; John Adam Kern, *A Study of Christianity as Organized*, 3d ed (Nashville: Cokesbury, 1928; orig. publ. 1910), 373–544.

3. James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, 2 vols., 2d. ed. (North Richland Hills, Tex.: BIBAL Press, 2001), 2:644.

4. Ibid., 644–45.

5. *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, An American Commentary on the New Testament (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1886), 387.

6. *New Century Bible*, The Gospel of Matthew, by David Hill (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1972), 275.

7. Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, vol. 22 in The New American Commentary, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 278.

8. *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical*, trans. and ed. Philip Schaff, Matthew (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1950; orig. publ. 1865?), 328.

9. *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, General Articles; Matthew-Mark, “Matthew” (Nashville: Broadman, 1969), 183.

10. *Matthew 8–20: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch and ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 450.

11. *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 201–202.

12. *Broadman Bible Commentary*, 8:183–84.

13. *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel*, Reading the New Testament Series (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 191.

14. 1 QS 5:25–6:1; CD 7:2–3; CD 9:2–8; 9:16–22.

15. *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 201.

16. *Matthew*, Good News Commentaries (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 178.

17. *Reading Matthew*, 191.

18. *Matthew*, Interpretation: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1993), 213.

19. *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 356. Calvin argued that the church had not yet come to be when this instruction was given but regarded discipline in his day as centering in the elders.

20. *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (Cambridge: University Press, 1883), 144.

21. *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 137.

22. *The Holy Bible..., with an Explanatory and Critical Commentary*, New Testament, vol. 1, Matthew-Luke (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), 95.

23. J. R. Dummelow, ed., *A Commentary on the Holy Bible*, author of “Matthew” not specified (London: Macmillan, 1909), 686.

24. Vol. 1 in *Matthew*, Commentary on the Four Gospels (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1928), 324–25.

25. *An Exposition of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (London: William Hill Collingridge, 1852), 1:167.

26. *Notes on the New Testament*, ed. Robert Frew, Matthew and Mark (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956; orig. publ. 1832), 187.

27. *Matthew*, trans. Ray Togtman, Bible Student's Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 339.

28. *The New Testament for English Readers*, vol. 1, part 1, Matthew-Luke. 2d ed. (London: Rivingtons, 1868), 129.

29. *Good News in Matthew: Matthew in Today's English Version* (Cleveland: William Collins and World Publishing, 1976), 129.

30. *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 388.

31. Those commentators who support this position are, in chronological order, Edward Hayes Plumptre, *The Layman's Handy Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Charles John Ellicott, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957; orig. publ. 1879), 261–62; Philip Schaff and Matthew B. Riddle, *A Popular Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 1, Introduction and the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1879), 156; George Whitefield Clark, *Brief Notes on the New Testament*, The Gospels (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1884), 66; James Morison, *A Practical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew* (rev. ed.: Minneapolis: Klock and Klock Christian Publishers, 1981; orig. publ. 1884), 331–32; Arthur Lukyn Williams, *The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell, vol. 15, *Matthew*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 212; William Walsham How, *The New Testament of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ...with a Brief Commentary*, vol. 1, The Four Gospels (London: S.P.C.K., 1893), n.p.; William Fletcher Slater, *The Century Bible*, St. Matthew (Edinburgh: T. C. and E. C. Jack,n.d. [1901?]), 244; Willoughby Charles Allen, *The International Critical Commentary*, Gospel According to St. Matthew, 3d ed. (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1912; orig. publ. 1907), 198; Philip Micklem, *St. Matthew*, Westminster Commentaries, ed. Walter Lock (London: Methuen, 1917), 198; Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 1, Matthew, Mark (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1930), 149; Richard Charles Henry Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1943), 701–703; George Ernest Pritchard Cox, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, Torch Bible Commentaries (London: SCM Press, 1952), 118; Frederick Clifton Grant, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2, chs. 13:53–28, Harper's Annotated Bible Series (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955), 20; Floyd Vivian Filson, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 201; Wallie Amos Criswell, *Expository*

Notes on the Gospel of Matthew (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 108; William Hersey Davis, *Davis' Notes on Matthew* (Nashville: Broadman, 1962), 70; Aubrey William Argyle, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), 141; J. C. Fenton, *The Gospel of St. Matthew*, The Pelican New Testament Commentaries (Harmondsworth, U. K.: Penguin Books, 1963), 298; R. E. Nixon, *The New Bible Commentary Revised*, 3d ed., ed. D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer, Matthew (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 839; David Hill, *New Century Bible*, The Gospel of Matthew, 276; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary*, Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 700–701; H. Benedict Green, C. R., *The Gospel According to Matthew in the Revised Standard Version*, The New Clarendon Bible (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 164; Jack P. Lewis, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, part 2, 13:53–28:20 (Austin: Sweet, 1976), 59; Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, Ore.: Multnomah, 1980), 217–18; Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Loyal* (Wheaton, Ill.: SP Publications, 1980), 127; Francis Wright Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew: A Commentary* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981), 379; Leopold Sabourin, S. J., *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, vol. 2, 7:28–28:20 (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1982), 721; Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, 178; R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester, U. K.: InterVarsity Press; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 274–75; John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, Matthew 16–23 (Chicago: Moody, 1988), 133–34; William David Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The International Critical Commentary*, The Gospel According to Saint Matthew, vol. 2, Matt. 8–18 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1991), 785; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 468; M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 8, General Articles on the New Testament, The Gospel of Matthew, The Gospel of Mark; Matthew (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 378; Donald Senior, C. P., *Matthew*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 209–10.

32. *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2 (chs. 11–28), The Daily Study Bible Series, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 187.

33. *The Moffatt New Testament Commentary*, The Gospel of Matthew (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, Doran, 1928), 154.

34. *Matthew* 8–20, 449–50.

35. Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 368–69; Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 469.

36. Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 2, trans. T. H. L. Parker and ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 230; Filson, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew*, 202; Günther Bornkamm, "The Authority to 'Bind' and 'Loose' in the Church in Matthew's Gospel: The Problem of Sources in Matthew's Gospel," in *The Interpretation of Matthew*, ed. Graham Stanton, Issues in Religion and Theology, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Fortress; London: S.P.C.K., 1983), 92–95; *Harper's Bible Commentary*, ed. James L. Mays, Matthew, by Reginald H. Fuller (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 971; Luz, *Matthew 8–20*, 454.

37. Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament*, ed. Robert Frew (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956; 1st publ. 1832), 188. Barnes was a Presbyterian. Alexander James, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 207. James was presumably a Roman Catholic.

38. A. Carr, *The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges*, Matthew, 144.

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108. *The Acts of the Apostles*, 254–55.

109. *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. Henry Beveridge, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 74–75.

110. *Notes on the New Testament*, Acts, 233.

111. *A Commentary on Acts of the Apostles*, 241–42.

112. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 9:449–50. A variant of this second interpretation has been Joseph Fitzmyer's (Roman Catholic) view that a "negative" conciliar decision about circumcision and the Mosaic law made by the apostles and elders and a "positive" Jerusalem church decision concerning "dietary matters and illicit marital unions" were joined together. *The Acts of the Apostles*, 563. Also, Simon J. Kistemaker (Reformed), *New Testament Commentary*, Acts, 560, in stating that "the council" unanimously elected Judas and Silas, may have implied a sharing between the apostles and the congregation.

113. *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 550.

114. *An Introduction to the Study of the Acts of the Apostles*, 144.

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137. Nathaniel Micklem, *A First Century Letter: Being an Exposition of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Student Christian Movement, 1920), 28.

138. Curtis Vaughan and Thomas D. Lea, *1 Corinthians*, Bible Study Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 57.

139. W. Gordon Robinson, *The Gospel and the Church in a Pagan World: A Study in 1 Corinthians* (London: Independent, 1958), 85; *Scripture Union Bible Study Books*, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, by Ralph P. Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 13.

140. Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Wise* (Wheaton, Ill.: Scripture Press, 1983), 66.

141. Millard J. Berquist, *Studies in First Corinthians* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1960), 40.

142. *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956; lst publ., New York, 1857), 83.

143. *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John W. Fraser and ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960; 1st publ. 1546), 106.

144. *Commentary on First Corinthians*, trans. A. Cusin (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1977; orig. publ. Edinburgh, 1889), 242–45.

145. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Westminster Commentaries. 5th ed. (London: Methuen, 1926), 37.

146. "The Discipline of the Church," in *The People of God: Essays on the Believers' Church*, ed. Paul A. Basden and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 1991), 76.

147. According to Vaughan and Lea, *1 Corinthians*, 57, “Paul views himself as president of an assembly and has already passed sentence.”

148. Joseph M. Gettys, *How to Study 1 Corinthians* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox, 1951), 45–46.

149. Robinson, *The Gospel and the Church in a Pagan World*, 85.

150. “2 Corinthians,” in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 11, 2 Corinthians-Philemon (Nashville: Broadman, 1971), 15.

151. *Power in Weakness: Conflict and Rhetoric in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians*, The New Testament in Context (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000), 49.

152. Ibid.

153. Beasley-Murray, “2 Corinthians,” 15.

154. *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 77.

155. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), 57.

156. *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 881.

157. “Exegesis” of 2 Corinthians in *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1953), 10:295.

158. *The New Century Bible Commentary*, 1 and 2 Corinthians by F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1971, 1978), 184.

159. *2 Corinthians*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald, 1998), 54.

160. *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 90–91.

161. *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 40, 2 Corinthians (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1986), 37.

162. *Second Corinthians*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Reading and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987), 22.

163. *A Handbook on Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians*, UBS

Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 41.

164. *The New Testament Message* (Fort Worth: Pioneer, 1925), 2:50.

165. *Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1975), 298–99. Fisher also held that the minority in the church supported the offender.

166. Beet, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistles to the Corinthians*, 333; Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 882; Fisher, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*, 300; Baird, *1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians*, 77; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 48–49; *The New American Commentary*, vol. 29, 2 Corinthians by David E. Garland (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 125–26; Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1994), 1:176; Linda L. Belleville, *2 Corinthians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), 73; Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 78.

167. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 58.

168. *The Interpreter's Bible*, 10:295.

169. Hodge, *An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 36.

170. R. H. Strachan, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, The Moffatt New Testament Commentary (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1935), 71.

171. Jean Héring, *The Second Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians*, trans. A. W. Heathcote and P. J. Allcock (London: Epworth, 1967), 16, fn. 8.

172. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians* in New Century Bible Commentary, 184.

173. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 91.

174. Ibid., 91; *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 40, 2 Corinthians by Ralph P. Martin (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1986), 37; Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1:175.

175. *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians and the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. T. A. Smail and ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973: orig. publ. 1547), 29–30.

176. *The New American Commentary*, 29:127.

177. Lyman Coleman, *The Apostolical and Primitive Church, Popular in Its Movement, and Simple in Its Worship*, 2d ed. (Boston: Gould, Kendall and Lincoln, 1844; orig. publ. 18??), 54–56; Ralph Wardlaw, *Congregational Independency in Contradistinction to Episcopacy and Presbyterianism: The Church Polity of the New Testament* (Glasgow: James Maclehose, 1864; orig. publ. 1848), 245–47; Edwin Charles Dargan, *Ecclesiology: A Study of the Churches* (Louisville: Charles T. Dearing, 1897), 39.

178. For a detailed comparison of the uses of *ekkl_sia* in the New Testament as presented by Baptist authors (Dargan, J. B. Thomas, H. E. Dana and L. M. Sipes, Earl D. Radmacher), see the present author's *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, 2d ed., 2:503–6.

179. Coleman, *The Apostolical and Primitive Church*, 125. But this tradition has also been traced to Jerome. Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, rev. Cyril C. Richardson, Wilhelm Pauck, and Robert T. Handy (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), 41.

180. Coleman, *The Apostolical and Primitive Church*, 126–32; Edward T. Hiscox, *The Baptist Church Directory: A Guide to the Doctrines and Discipline, Officers and Ordinances, Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* (New York: Sheldon and Co., 1860), 236–38; Wardlaw, *Congregational Independency*, 152–53; James Madison Pendleton, *Church Manual: Designed for the Use of Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1869), 24–25; William Williams, *Apostolic Church Polity* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1874), 7–14; reprinted in *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, D.C.: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 529–31; Dargan, *Ecclesiology*, 53–56.

181. *The Ecclesiastical Polity of the New Testament Unfolded, and Its Points of Coincidence or Disagreement with Prevailing Systems Indicated*, 2d ed. (London: Jackson and Walford, 1854), 1–42.

182. Ibid., 3–5. On three views as to the basis for church polity, i.e., tradition, expediency, and the Scriptures, see H. E. Dana and L. M. Sipes, *A Manual of Ecclesiology*, 2d ed. (Kansas City, Kans.: Central Seminary Press, 1944), 195–212.

183. This third answer was embraced by the first professor of ecclesiastical history, church government, and pastoral duties in Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Greenville, S. C. See Williams, *Apostolic Church Polity*, 51–71;

reprint ed., 543–50.

184. Williams, *Apostolic Church Polity*, 42–44; reprint ed., 541.

185. Ignatius, *Letter to the Ephesians*, ch. 4; *Letter to the Magnesians*, chs. 6, 7; *Letter to the Trallians*, chs. 2, 3, 7; *Letter to the Romans*, chs. 2, 9: *Letter to the Philadelphians*, ch. 7; *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, ch. 8.

186. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.2. 1; 3.3. 1; 4. 26.5; 4.33. 8; Tertullian, *On the Prescription of Heretics*, chs. 21, 32; Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 4. 5.

187. Cyprian, *Letters*, 51.8; 67.4–5; Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 83.

188. Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 81–82.

189. Dargan, *Ecclesiology*, 79–80.

190. Coleman, *The Apostolical and Primitive Church*, 87–123, esp. 116.

191. Ibid., 281–310.

192. Leo I, *Sermons*, 3.2.3.

193. Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 152.

194. Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought*, rev. ed., vol. 2, *From Augustine to the Eve of the Reformation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1987), 93–96.

195. Gregory I, *Letters*, 5.20; *Epistola ad Johannen Jejunatorem*, in *Regula*, 5.44, trans. in Joseph Cullen Ayer, *A Source Book for Ancient Church History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 592–95.

196. Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 201–202, 208, 259, 262.

197. Ibid., 271.

198. Albert Henry Newman, *A Manual of Church History*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1933), 1:379–86, 543–600.

199. *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 39, *Church and Ministry*, vol. 1, ed. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 301–14.

200. James Leo Garrett, Jr., *The Nature of the Church According to the Radical Continental Reformation* (Fort Worth: pvt. ptg., 1957).

201. *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, trans. and ed. H. Wayne Pipkin and John Howard Yoder, Classics of the Radical Reformation, no. 5 (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1989).

202. Peter Rideman, *Account of Our Religion, Doctrine and Faith*, trans. Kathleen E. Hasenberg (n.p.p.: Hodder and Stoughton; Plough Publishing House, 1950).

203. Dietrich Philips, "The Church of God," in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, ed. George Huntston Williams and Angel M. Mergal, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 25 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), 240–60.

204. "A Kind Admonition on Church Discipline," "A Clear Account of Excommunication," and "Instruction on Excommunication," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons, c. 1496–1561*, trans. and ed. John Christian Wenger (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956), 407–18, 455–85, 959–98.

205. "The Schleitheim Brotherly Union," in *The Legacy of Michael Sattler*, trans. and ed. John Howard Yoder, Classics of the Radical Reformation, no. 1 (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1973), 39.

206. Albert Henry Newman, *A History of Anti-Pedobaptism from the Rise of Pedobaptism to AD 1609* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1897), 257.

207. "Pilgram Marpeck's Confession of 1532," art. 29, in *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, trans. and ed. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, Classics of the Radical Reformation, no. 2 (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1978), 113.

208. *The Writings of Robert Harrison and Robert Browne*, ed. Albert Peel and Leland H. Carlson, Elizabethan Nonconformist Texts, vol. 2 (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1953).

209. *The Writings of John Greenwood, 1587–1590, together with the Joint Writings of Henry Barrow and John Greenwood, 1587–1590*, ed. Leland H. Carlson, Elizabethan Nonconformist Texts, vol. 4 (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962).

210. *The Writings of Henry Barrow, 1587–1590*, ed. Leland H. Carlson, Elizabethan Nonconformist Texts, vol. 3 (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1962); *The Writings of Henry Barrow, 1590–1591*, ed. Elizabethan Nonconformist Texts, vol. 5 (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966).

211. *Certayne Reasons and Arguments, Proving That It Is Not Lawfull to Heare or Have Any Spirituall Communion with the Present Ministerie of the Church of England* (n.p.p.: n.p., 1608; University Microfilms, STC 14660, of copy in Bodleian Library, Oxford).

212. *An Apologie or Defence of Such True Christians as Are Commonly*

(but Unjustly) Called Brownists (n.p.p.; n.p., 1604); University Microfilms STC 238, of copy in Cambridge University Library).

213. *A Booke Which Sheweth the Life and Manners of All True Christians* (1582), sect. 35, in *Writings of Robert Harrison and Robert Browne*, 253.

214. *Four Causes of Separation* (1587), *in The Writings of Henry Barrow*, 1587–1590, 54.

215. *A True Description out of the Worde of God, of the Visible Church* (1589), in ibid., 214. This definition is the same as that given in the London Confession of 1589, art. 1, composed by Barrow and Greenwood. But Barrow, unlike Browne, favored a ruling eldership within the congregation. Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Boston: Pilgrim, 1960; orig. publ. 1893), 33, 31–32.

216. *An Apologie or Defence of Such True Christians as Are Commonly (but Unjustly) Called Brownists*, positions 1, 2, 5, 7 (pp. 36–37).

217. Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, 43–44, 66–67, 71.

218. *John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition*, National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion Dissertation Series, no. 1 (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1982), 159.

219. In *The Works of John Robinson, Pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers*, vol. 2 (London: John Snow, 1851), 1–506.

220. George, *John Robinson and the English Separatist Tradition*, 93, fn. 2.

221. Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 409.

222. Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, 403–408.

223. “Short Confession of Faith in 20 Articles” (1609), art. 13; “A Short Confession of Faith” (1610), art. 25, in W. L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1969), 101, 109.

224. “A Declaration of Faith of English People Remaining at Amsterdam in Holland” (1611), arts, 11, 12, 16, 17–18, 21, in ibid., 120, 121, 122.

225. Arts. 33, 36, 45, 38, 42–44, 47, in ibid., 165, 166, 168, 166–67, 168–69.

226. “The True Gospel-Faith” (1654), arts, 21–23; Somerset Particular Baptist Confession (1656), arts. 31, 32, 34; Standard Confession of General Baptists (1660), arts. 16–17, in ibid., 194, 212–13, 230.

227. Art. 26, sects. 7, 8–9, 10, 12, 15, in ibid., 286–89.

228. Arts. 30, 31, 34, in ibid., 318–20, 322–23.

229. See the American confessions the texts of which are included in ibid., 347–400; see also Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1959), 390–98.

230. Arts. 10, 11, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 1969 ed., 379.

231. Art. 13, in ibid., 388.

232. Art. 6, in ibid., 396.

233. Part 2, "Ecclesiastical Principles," in G. Keith Parker, *Baptists in Europe: History and Confessions of Faith* (Nashville: Broadman, 1982), 141–44.

234. Chs. 13–16, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 1969 ed., 423–31.

235. Arts. 5, 6, in Parker, *Baptists in Europe*, 155–56.

236. Art. 6, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 1969 ed., 404–405.

237. Part 2, art. 1, in Parker, *Baptists in Europe*, 64–69.

238. Arts. 7, 8, in ibid., 221–23.

239. Art. 9, in ibid., 102.

240. Art. 10, in ibid., 179–81.

241. Art. 13, in ibid., 211–13.

242. Art. 2, in ibid., 97–98.

243. Arts. 12–14, in ibid., 194–96.

244. *The Baptist Church Directory*, 56, 240.

245. *A Treatise on Church Order* (Charleston, S.C.: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1858; rpt.: Harrisonburg, Va.: Gano Books 1982), 80–83, 263–74.

246. *Church Manual*, 101–17.

247. *The Church: Its Polity and Ordinances* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1879), 13–20.

248. *Ecclesiology*, 46, 34, 107, 118–24.

249. *Polity and Practice in Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1935), 21–37.

250. *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of the Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: Griffith and Rowland, 1908).

251. *The Efficient Church: A Study of Polity and Methods in the Light of New Testament Principles and Modern Conditions and Needs* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1923).

252. *Working Together in a Spiritual Democracy* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1935), 1–25; *Building Better Churches: A Guide to the Pastoral Ministry* (Nashville: Broadman, 1947), 29–82.

253. "Baptist Churches Today and Tomorrow," in *The Pattern of the Church: A Baptist View*, ed. A. Gilmore (London: Lutterworth, 1963), 143.

254. *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson, 1963), 52–53.

255. *Understanding Baptist Polity* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1964), 3–4, 6.

256. *How Southern Baptists Do Their Work* (Nashville: Broadman, 1951).

257. *Rope of Sand with Strength of Steel: How Southern Baptists Function and Why* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1974), in which he differentiated the isolation of Independent Baptists, the society method of the American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., and the "connectionalism" of Southern Baptists (pp. 58–66); *Baptist Polity as I See It* (Nashville: Broadman, 1983), in which the "connectionalism" of Southern Baptists was replaced by the term "direct and balanced system of denominational administration" (pp. 91–92); rev. ed.: Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998); *Southern Baptist Polity at Work in a Church* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1987).

258. *A Church at Work: A Handbook of Church Polity*, 27–36.

259. *The New Hiscox Guide for Baptist Churches* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson, 1995), 190.

260. Rev. Craig D. Atwood (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), passim.

261. *The Baptist Church Directory*, 13.

262. *The Standard Manual for Baptist Churches* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society), 10.

263. *Church Manual*, 7.

264. *Old Landmarkism: What Is It?* 2d ed. (Texarkana, Ark.-Tex.: Baptist Sunday School Committee, 1928; orig. publ. 1880), 29–34, 35, 53, 64, 80.

265. *The People Called Baptists* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention), 42.

266. Quoted in Ernest A. Payne, *The Fellowship of Believers: Baptist Thought and Practice Yesterday and Today*, enl. ed. (London: Carey Kingsgate, 1952), 143.

267. *Polity and Practice in Baptist Churches*, 26–27.

268. *A Manual of Ecclesiology* (Kansas City, Kan.: Central Seminary Press), 138.

269. *The New Hiscox Guide for Baptist Churches*, 1.

270. In these texts the reference is to “holy priesthood,” “royal priesthood,” “priests,” or “a kingdom and priests,” but never to “a priest.”

271. For more detail on these developments, see Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, 2d ed., 2:603–14. For a highly polemical yet careful treatment of the differences between John Smyth and Edgar Young Mullins on the priesthood of all Christians, see Malcolm B. Yarnell III, “Changing Baptist Concepts of Royal Priesthood: John Smyth and Edgar Young Mullins,” in *The Rise of the Laity in Evangelical Protestantism*, ed. Deryck W. Lovegrove (London, New York: Routledge, 2002), 236–52.

272. Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 2d. ed., 2:616–17. The New Testament examples of “spiritual sacrifices” are worship, witness, stewardship, and service. Ibid., 609–10.

273. Ibid., 2:220–21.

274. Some concentrated on the gift of tongues, or glossolalia: John P. Newport, “Speaking in Tongues,” *Home Missions* 36 (May 1965): 7–9, 21–26; Jimmy Allen Millikin, “The Corinthian Glossolalia: The Historical Setting, an Exegetical Examination, and a Contemporary Restatement” (Th.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1967); Frank Stagg, E. Glenn Hinson, and Wayne E. Oates, *Glossolalia: Tongue Speaking in Biblical, Historical, and Psychological Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967); Watson E. Mills, “A Theological Interpretation of Tongues in Acts and 1 Corinthians” (Th.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1968); Luther B. Dyer, ed., *Tongues* (Jefferson City, Mo.: Le Roi, 1971); Watson E. Mills, *Understanding Speaking in Tongues* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972); Frank Stagg, *The Holy*

Spirit Today (Nashville: Broadman, 1973), 42–57; rev. ed.: (Macon, Ga.: Smyth and Helwys, 1995), 41–57; Fisher Humphreys and Malcolm Tolbert, *Speaking in Tongues* (New Orleans: Insight, 1973; Zachary, La.: Christian Litho, n.d.); Watson E. Mills, ed., *Speaking in Tongues: Let's Talk about It* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1973); Bernard L. Ramm, *Questions about the Spirit* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1974), 112–18, 130–37; J. W. MacGorman, "Glossolalic Error and Its Correction: 1 Corinthians 12–14," *Review and Expositor* 80 (Summer 1983): 389–400; Watson E. Mills, *A Theological—Exegetical Approach to Glossolalia* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985); and Max Turner, *Power from on High: The Spirit in Israel's Restoration and Witness in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), esp. 267–315.

Others have treated spiritual gifts generally: W. T. Conner, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (Nashville: Broadman, 1949), 140–45; Joseph Richard Estes, "The Biblical Concept of Spiritual Gifts" (Th.D. diss., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1957); W. A. Criswell, *The Holy Spirit in Today's World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1966), 119–87; Dale Moody, *Spirit of the Living God: The Biblical Concepts Interpreted in Context* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 89–101; E. Earle Ellis, "'Spiritual Gifts' in the Pauline Community," *New Testament Studies* 20 (January 1974): 128–44; J. W. MacGorman, *The Gifts of the Spirit* (Nashville: Broadman, 1974); Lynn B. Clayton, *No Second-Class Citizens* (Nashville: Broadman, 1976); J. Terry Young, *The Spirit within You* (Nashville: Broadman, 1977), 77–101; Robert H. Culpepper, *Evaluating the Charismatic Movement: A Theological and Biblical Appraisal* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson, 1977); Bert Dominy, "Paul and Spiritual Gifts: Reflections on 1 Corinthians 12–14," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 26 (Fall 1983): 49–68; Ralph P. Martin, *The Spirit and the Congregation: Studies in 1 Corinthians 12–15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984); Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983–85), 3:875–82; Max Turner, "Spiritual Gifts Then and Now," *Vox Evangelica*, 15: *Biblical and Historical Essays from London Bible College*, ed. Harold H. Rowdon (Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster, 1985), 41–50; Charles H. Talbert, "Paul's Understanding of the Holy Spirit: The Evidence of 1 Corinthians 12–14," in *Perspectives on the New Testament: Essays in Honor of Frank Stagg*, ed. Talbert (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University, 1985), 95–108; Donald A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987): Siegfried S. Schatzmann, *A Pauline Theology of Charismata* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1987); Kenneth S. Hemphill, *Spiritual Gifts: Empowering the New Testament Church* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988); Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical*

Doctrine (Leicester, U.K.: Inter-Varsity; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1016–88; Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 2:197–218.

275. Some Baptists have agreed with Reformed and Dispensationalist theologians as to the postapostolic cessation of the extraordinary gifts, while others have agreed with Pentecostal, Charismatic, and Charismatic Roman Catholic theologians that the extraordinary gifts are given in the modern era. See Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 2d ed., 2:221–26.

276. Clayton, *No Second-Class Citizens*, 8.

277. *"Jeder Baptist ein Missionar"* and *"jedes Mitglied als Missionar,"* as reported in Günter Balders, *Theurer Bruder Oncken: Das Leben Johann Gerhard Onckens in Bildern und Dokumenten*, 2d ed. (Wuppertal und Kassel: Oncken Verlag, 1984), 92.

278. Documentation uncertain.

279. *A Theology of Church and Ministry* (Nashville: Broadman, 1960), 80.

280. Charles E. Matthews, *Every Christian's Job* (Nashville: Broadman, 1951); Charles S. Kelley, Jr., *How Did They Do It? The Story of Southern Baptist Evangelism* (New Orleans: Insight, 1993), 35–54. Per Malcolm R. McDow.

281. "The Most Important Change in Baptist Life," *Baptists Today*, July 2001, 8.

282. Note, for example, for Congregationalists, A True Confession (1596), arts. 17–23, and for Baptists, the Second London Confession of Particular Baptists (1677), art. 26, esp. parags. 3–11, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (1969 ed.), 87–89, 285–89.

283. H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987), 247; Charles Hartshorn Maxson, *The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1958), 131–38.

284. *A Theology of Church and Ministry*, 73.

285. *A Summary of Church-Dicipline* [sic] (1774), ch. 2, in James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Baptist Church Discipline* (Nashville: Broadman, 1962), 34.

286. As indicative of this trend, see Robert Boyte Crawford Howell, *The Deaconship: Its Nature, Qualifications, Relations, and Duties* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1846), 18, 23, 30–31.

287. As indicative of this trend, see Howard B. Foshee, *The Ministry of the*

Deacon (Nashville: Convention Press, 1968), esp. 23–29, 32–33, 38–83.

288. “A Short Confession of Faith” (1610), art. 33; First London Confession of Particular Baptists (1644), art. 43; “The True Gospel-Faith” (1654), art. 21; Standard Confession of General Baptists (1660), art. 17; Second London Confession of Particular Baptists (1677), art. 26, parag. 12, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (1969 ed.), 110–11, 168, 194, 230, 288.

289. *A Manual of Church-Dicipline*, chapter 5, in Garrett, *Baptist Church Discipline*, 42–49.

290. Gregory A. Wills, *Democratic Religion: Freedom, Authority, and Church Discipline in the Baptist South, 1785–1900* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Stephen Michael Haines, “Church Discipline as Practiced by Representative Southern Baptist Churches, 1880–1939” (Ph.D.. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1984).

291. *Systematic Theology*, 934. Grudem also concedes that some other matters “may be required to be brought to the whole church,” such as the calling of a pastor, “new directions in the ministry of the church,” and major financial and budgetary decisions.

292. First London Confession of Particular Baptists, art. 33; Second London Confession of Particular Baptists, ch. 26, parag. 3, in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (1969 ed.), 165, 285–86.

293. Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 2d ed., 2:814, fn. 63. The New Hampshire Confession (1833, 1853) contained no article on the kingdom of God.

294. See especially George Dana Boardman, *The Kingdom (Basileia): An Exegetical Study* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899); Thomas P. Stafford, *A Study of the Kingdom* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1925); William Thomas Rouse, *The Kingdom of God* (Dallas: Helms, 1942); Jesse Wilson Hodges, *Christ's Kingdom and Coming: With an Analysis of Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957); Paul Rowntree Clifford, *The Reality of the Kingdom: Making Sense of God's Reign in a World like Ours* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); and various books by George Eldon Ladd.

295. *Jesus and the Kingdom: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 260–73.

296. John N. Vaughan in *The World's Twenty Largest Churches* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 16, 19, 27, 30, 32, 261, 263, 269, 270, seemingly coined

the term “superchurch.” His next book he entitled *The Large Church: A Twentieth-Century Expression of the First-Century Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985). Later he authored *Megachurches and America's Cities: How Churches Grow* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); Vaughan attributed (34, 54) to C. Peter Wagner and Paul Heibert the coining of the term “metachurch” (“several tens of thousands” of members) in distinction from “megachurch” (“several thousands of members”).

297. “The Pastor as Change Agent in the Growth of a Southern Baptist Mega Church Model” (D. Min. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 1991). At the time of Beardsley's study the church had 12,979 resident members (p. 1).

298. Ibid., 200, 309, 278, 200, 310, 194, 267, 315, 100. James L. Sullivan, *Baptist Polity as I See It* (1983), 62, had warned: “Pastors who are dictatorial or autocratic, or churches that allow groups...to assume such roles, will someday pay a high price for this deviation from Baptist heritage.” C. E. Colton, *A 21st Century New Testament Church: Its Polity and Present-day Problems* (Dallas: n.p., 1999), 87–94, has recently written of “the trend toward” and “the danger of” “centralization” in Baptist church life. But megachurches in mainline denominations tended to be led by the full-time “staff and a half-dozen or fewer volunteer leaders,” according to Lyle E. Schaller, *The Seven-Day-a-Week Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 121.

299. *Megachurches and America's Cities*, 84. Vaughan, 85, deplores “personnel policies and practice that make staff members accountable to the committee rather than to the pastor” as a hindrance to church growth.

300. Scott Camp, on assuming the pastorate of First Baptist Church, Mansfield, Texas, declared publicly: “You won't find a church that's shaping its city and that is rapidly becoming a powerful church where the pastor does not have absolute authority to hire and fire his own staff and build his own team.” Robert Cadwallader, “Metro Pastor to Take Over Mansfield Job,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 19 August 2002.

301. *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Church Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), esp. 17, 28, 55–60.

302. *The Church the Body of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 122; *Body Dynamics* (Wheaton, Ill.: SP Publications, 1982), 94.

303. *The Church the Body of Christ*, 182–83; *Body Dynamics*, 141.

304. *The Anatomy of a Church*, ed. Steve Miller (Panorama City, Calif.: Word of Grace Communications, 1984), 128.

305. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 725.

306. Young Sik Noh, "Equipping Church Leadership to Implement Baptist Congregational Polity for Newhope Korean Baptist Church, Lake Forest, California" (D.Min. project, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997), esp. 1–2.

307. *Dallas Theological Seminary 2002–2003 Catalog*, 160–61, 33. More than 35 percent of the students currently enrolled are listed as "Baptists," and almost 14 percent are listed as "Southern Baptists" (170).

308. Henry G. Weston, *Constitution and Polity of the New Testament Church* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1895), 66.

309. At the beginning of World War II, Gaines S. Dobbins, *Can a Religious Democracy Survive?* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1941), 191–208, posed the question as to whether Baptist Congregationalism could survive in a world dominated by political totalitarianism.

310. McDaniel, *The People Called Baptists*, 61, asserted that Congregational polity "accords with our sense of freedom and justice."

311. See above, 2.

312. Robert D. Dale, *Pastoral Leadership: A Handbook of Resources for Effective Congregational Leadership* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986), did treat the subject substantively.

313. *A Theology of Church and Ministry*, 84.

314. Ibid., 15–16, 21–22.

315. *A Theology of Church and Ministry*, 19.

316. *Rope of Sand with Strength of Steel*, 40; *Baptist Polity as I See It*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 139–40.

317. Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 2d ed., 2:645.

318. Indeed, in many contexts the plurality of elders model I have presented is viewed as a sub-set of Congregationalism. Hence the question here revolves around the origin of the authority of the office of elder/overseer. The question is not even regarding the election of the elder: the question is, when thusly designated an elder, is his authority merely delegated to him, or does the office itself, as one ordained by Christ, carry with it responsibilities and requirements that demand commensurate divinely originated gifting and authority? Who is

responsible in the first place for the doctrinal oversight of the congregation? Is the elder held to a higher standard because of the office in which he is placed? I believe so, hence, the definition of the church must include the Christ-ordained offices to be properly "set in order."

Chapter 4

[*]*This essay is dedicated to The Very Reverend James G. Munroe.*

1. Ernst Käsemann, "Paulus und der Frühkatholizismus," *Zeitschrift für Theologic und Kirche*, 60 (196): 75–89.

2. Emil Brunner, *Das Missverständnis der Kirche* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1951).

3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon Christendom*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944), 210.

4. Richard Newton, "The Present Crisis of the Protestant Episcopal Church and the Duty of Evangelical Men in Reference to It," published by request (Philadelphia: James Hammond, 1874), 13.

5. Melchior Leydecker, *Synopsis Theologiae Christianae.* VI, 1, paragraphs 693–94; as quoted in Emanuel Hirsch, *Hilfsbuch zum Studium der Dogmatik*, 4th ed. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1964), 421–22. Translated by Paul Zahl.

6. The Lutheran *Formula of Concord* (1570) treats the *tertius usus legis* ambiguously, as does Cranmer's *Third Homily of Good Works*, known formally as the *Fifth Homily.*

7. Some regard Bishop Richard Hooper of Gloucester (d. 1555) during the early Reformation period as being the first influential Anglican to teach a "third mark" of church identity. In Hooper's case, it was church order reflected in Episcopal vesture, for he was a Protestant Puritan who saw vestments as a holdover from unreformed Catholicism. But Hooper the Protestant Puritan and Laud the catholicizer had in common the belief that *two* marks of the church—i.e., the gospel and the Bible sacraments—were not enough. You had to have three. So meet the right and the left!

8. See Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Tudor Church Militant. Edward VI and the Protestant Reformation* (London: Penguin Press, 1999).

9. See Jasper Ridley, *Queen Mary's Martyrs* (London, 2001).

10. For a more thorough summary of this period, see Paul M. Zahl, *The Protestant Face of Anglicanism* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1998), 9–

11. See Paul M. Zahl, *Five Women of the English Reformation* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2001), 10–26.

12. Examples from recent experience would be Bishop William T. Manning of New York (1921–1946), who tried to “catholicize” his diocese by extirpating “low-church” or “Protestant” clergy by Mazarin-like means; and Bishop Richard Grein, also of New York (1989–2001), who attempted the same thing, successfully, in the 1990s.

13. Examples from recent experience are Bishop John Spong of Newark (1979–2000), who sought to root out “traditional” clergy from his diocese in the 1980s, and Bishop Richard Holloway of Edinburgh (1986–2001), who saw his final, “official” life's work as attacking with articulate malice all traditionalist clergy in Britain and the Third World.

14. There is a trend today in some branches of Anglicanism to emphasize the ministry of deacons as a standing or permanent order in itself. This trend argues that deacons in the early church were a fixed category of persons selected to assist the presbyters and bishops rather than simply be presbyters-in-the-becoming. On this interpretation of the diaconate, such people, such “permanent deacons,” are the “service staff” or support team for the more public figures of “priests” and bishops. The new view has nothing in common with the Reformation cornerstone of the priesthood of all believers. It is, rather, a corollary to an inflated “Catholic” view of the priesthood and has no status within Protestant views of ministry. What “permanent deacons” will end up being in practice—beyond people who go to a lot of church services and deliver meals-on-wheels—remains to be seen.

15. The word *priest* when it refers to a commissioned human being appears in quotation marks within this essay. This is because I do not believe the word can be properly applied to anyone other than Christ Jesus, our great High Priest. For me, and for Protestant Anglicans generally, the word *priest* is shorthand for *presbyter.* It is better in all cases to apply the word *minister* to an ordained person. Persons, “priest” and bishops are but ministers of the Word of God. And is there a higher role in life?

16. See Franklin S. Rising's once famous tract entitled “Are There Romanizing Germs in the Prayer Book?” This edgy little piece carries no date but was definitely written in the early 1870s. I read it in the manuscript collection of the Bishop Payne Library at Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria.

17. The true Anglican and also biblical perspective on “priest” and presbyter is found in J. B. Lightfoot's “Dissertation on the Christian Ministry,” which was a section of Bishop Lightfoot's 1868 Philippians commentary. It has never been bettered yet is rarely consulted anymore.

18. The Oxford theologian John Webster has written recently, “That to which the ministerial action of the church is ordered is the ‘showing’ of Jesus Christ's self-proclamation in word, baptism and the Lord's Supper....Apostolicity has less to do with transmission and much more to do with identity or authenticity, with the ‘Christianness’ of the church's teaching and mission.” By “Christianness” Webster means catholicity. See his “The Self-Organizing Power of the Gospel of Christ: Episcopacy and Community Formation,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, no. 1 (March 2001): 76, 80.

19. There are two other consecutive questions, one relating to the ordination function and the other to the bishop's ministry of mercy among the poor.

20. Webster, “Self-Organizing Power,” 77.

21. Recently on a crowded Sunday afternoon on a New England campus, I walked by the student center for Episcopal ministry. The sign advertising the evening service said: “Episcopal liturgy at 5 o'clock today.” The sign did not say, “Need help with test stress? Try us.” “Want to learn more about God and religion? We can help.” “At the end of your rope? Try God.” “Burned by the dating game? We can offer some perspective.” “Need some comfort after September 11? We can help.”

What I am saying is that “Episcopal liturgy at 5 o'clock” is thin soup, watery and watered down. It may attract an elusive fraction of people who like “church.” But that is a tiny percentage. Needy people walk by on their way to evangelical, passionate religion. Thoughtful people will make tracks to the Newman Center!

22. This was King Charles I's phrase in the 1630s and 1640s.

23. A retired Episcopal bishop was walking high on a mountain path several years ago, describing his “conversion.” He said he had been “converted” while listening for the first time to a service of choral evensong sung by the Men and Boys of Magdalen College, Oxford. He waxed eloquent. A faraway look came into his eyes.

He said, “That was it. When I heard those men and boys singing so angelically, I was converted—I was converted to the Church.”

For my part, a Beatles song came to mind: “Fool on the Hill.”

24. E. A. Litton, *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology*, edited by Philip E. Hughes (1882, 1892; reprint; London: James Clarke, 1960), 401.

25. J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 95, and his dissertation on “The Christian Ministry,” 195ff. Edwin Hatch (1835–1889) concurred with Lightfoot in his 1880 Bampton Lectures, later published under the title *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches* (London: Longmans, Green, 1901), 39, 99.

26. Bishop Spong has publicly declared more than once that if Christianity hopes to survive the twenty-first century it must abandon its supernaturalism, including its supernatural Christ, and work for the betterment of mankind here and now in this world.

27. *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 1026.

28. See, for example, Colin W. Williams, *New Directions in Theology Today*, vol. 4, *The Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 11–17.

29. See my *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 455–644.

30. Zahl in his *A Short Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) does not include the doctrine of the church.

31. Donald F. Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (New York: Macmillan, 1968; reprint ed.: Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1985).

Chapter 5

1. We do not enter into the subject of the planting of missions churches and the offered oversight of a mature, fully established church with reference to one that has yet to obtain that status. If a work is so small as to be unable to sustain a plurality of elders, the fellowship and support of an established work may be essential to the growth and maturity of a new work.

2. A few ancient texts do not contain the name “Ephesus” at Ephesians 1:1, and Colossians 4:16 is probably making reference to the Ephesian epistle.

3. The issue of “apostolic succession” as claimed by Rome and some other communions is based upon a misunderstanding both of the unique character of the apostolic office itself as well as the true nature of succession in the Christian worldview. We can surely accept the idea of apostolic succession in the sense of

possession of the truths delivered to the church for all time but not in the sense of a continuation of the *office* with multiple successors over time. As one has put it: “True catholicity consists not in succession but in possession, not in historical pedigree but in spiritual identity. Only those who possess and exhibit the doctrines, the spirit and the life of the apostles have the right to claim this mark of a true gospel church.” Poh Boon Sing, *The Keys of the Kingdom: A Study of the Biblical form of Church Government* (Malaysia, 1995), 38.

4. I.e., explaining the offense offered by eating things strangled or offered to idols (Acts 15:20, 29) and from sexual immorality. The brevity of the letter speaks to the fact that the decision of the council was primarily negative: that is, they rejected the additions to the gospel demanded by the Judaizers.

5. Though it goes beyond the scope of this presentation, it is interesting to note that a study of the earliest Christian documents outside the New Testament reveal two major forms of church governance: that of a plurality of elders, seen especially in what is traditionally called “Clement's Epistle to the Corinthians,” and a monarchical, one-bishop form of governance, seen especially in Ignatius. These two forms existed side-by-side until the monarchical form took over, developing into a form of prelacy with major bishops overseeing lesser ones. But, ironically, the existence of a plurality of elders remained normative in Rome until the fifth decade of the second century, as the epistle from the church at Rome to the church at Corinth demonstrates. The topic of that epistle was the unlawful rebellion of a faction at the church at Corinth against their properly instituted *elders.*

6. Even this, however admits of qualifications. The Lord Jesus commended the church at Ephesus (Rev. 2:2) for testing those who claimed to be apostles and in fact for finding them to be false. Therefore, a consistency had to be demonstrated between established doctrinal norms (such as Paul's consistency with the written Scriptures, Acts 17:11) even for those who claimed the title “apostle.”

7. The elders may call upon the deacons to serve in various capacities of ministry to the body, but they do so under the direction and authority of the elders.

8. Acts 4:5, 8, 23; 6:12, etc.

9. Notice that nothing is said of Titus being an “archbishop” or anything of the kind. He is acting directly upon apostolic orders from Paul himself.

10. Such would also provide a basis for asserting the necessity and

propriety of church membership. How can shepherds function as shepherds without a discernable flock?

11. We note in passing the fact that verse 19 likewise suggests judicial abilities on the part of the eldership as a whole, which involves plurality. It likewise points to the fact that while there is discussion of how to handle a charge against an elder, there is no corresponding guidance in the inspired Scripture regarding any supposedly higher office.

12. See James Leo Garrett, Jr., *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical, and Evangelical*, vol. 1, 2d ed. (North Richland Hills, Tex.: BIBAL Press, 2000), 206–208.

13. John Smyth (c. 1570–1612) in Amsterdam seemingly advocated within the congregation a plurality of leaders, presumably elders, but recently its impracticality has been noted. According to James Robert Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation: English Separatism, Mennonite Influence, and the Elect Nation*, Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History, no. 32 (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1991), 50, 81, 158–59, such polity encountered "the difficulty of determining authority in a congregation led by several equal elders and with power vested in the entire membership" and of resolving "theological differences within the congregation on such issues as predestination, the role of the state, and the identity of the elect nation."

14. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (combined edition; Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1996), 591.

15. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (reprint of 1869 edition; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960), 2: 327, emphasis added.

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