

*The Nature, Government  
and Function of the Church*

*A Reassessment*

STEPHEN C. PERKS



THE NATURE, GOVERNMENT AND  
FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH

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*A Reassessment*

STEPHEN C. PERKS

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*On the new forcers of Conscience under the  
Long PARLIAMENT*

Because you have thrown of your Prelate Lord,  
And with stiff Vows renounc'd his Liturgie  
To seise the widdow'd whore Pluralitie  
From them whose sin ye envi'd, not abhor'd,  
Dare ye for this adjure the Civil Sword  
To force our Consciences that Christ set free,  
And ride us with a classic Hierarchy  
Taught ye by meer *A. S.* and *Rotherford*?  
Men whose Life, Learning, Faith and pure intent  
Would have been held in high esteem with *Paul*  
Must now be nam'd and printed Hereticks  
By shallow *Edwards* and Scotch what d'ye call:  
But we do hope to find out all your tricks,  
Your plots and packing wors then those of *Trent*,  
That so the Parliament  
May with their wholsom and preventive Shears  
Clip your Phylacteries, though bauk your Ears,  
And succour our just Fears  
When they shall read this clearly in your charge  
*New Presbyter* is but *Old Priest* writ Large.

John Milton

## I

### INTRODUCTION

The name, pretence, and *presumed power and authority of the church* or churches, have been made and used as the greatest engine for the promoting and satisfying the avarice, sensuality, ambition, and cruelty of men that ever was in the world. . . . To this very day, “the church” here and there, as it is esteemed, is the greatest means of keeping Christian religion in its power and purity out of the world, and a temptation to multitudes of men to prefer the church before religion, and to be obstinate in their oppositions unto it. . . . The *secular, worldly interest* of multitudes lying in this presumptive church and the state of it, they preferred and exalted it above all that is called God, and made the greatest idol of it that ever was in the world; for it was the faith and profession of it, that its authority over the souls and consciences of men is above the authority of the Scriptures . . .

—John Owen<sup>1</sup>

THERE is perhaps no subject that Christians have discussed, debated and argued about more fiercely than that of the nature, government and function of the church. And the arguments have not been merely over denominational issues, but over issues within and specific to particular denominations, with representatives from various denominations sometimes holding some of the same views. But if it is true that this subject has been discussed at such length and argued over so fiercely, why does it need to be addressed again? The answer to this question is, I believe, because the church, by and large,

1. *An Inquiry into the Original, Nature, Institution, Powers, Order, and Communion of Evangelical Churches in Works* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust [Goold Edition, 1850-53], 1965), Vol. XV, p. 224f. See the discussion in Appendix A, sections 4 and 5 for a modern context in which this quotation would be pertinent. See also note 44.



has not yet arrived at a satisfactory conclusion regarding this matter. There are many and varied reasons for this failure to understand the biblical doctrine of the church. I do not intend to go into all these reasons. Rather, I shall concentrate on positively setting forth what I believe to be the biblical and thus truly Christian doctrine of the church.

(i) *The scope of this essay*

What I have to say in this essay is not primarily related to the issue of denomination. My primary purpose is not to argue for a particular denomination. The form of church government found in the New Testament is that of *elderships* or councils of elders. Therefore in sections 3 (ii) and 3 (iv) I deal with the subject of church government in this biblical form of elderships. I do so not on the basis of denominational sectarianism, but simply because the Bible presents the material in this form, and it is the biblical doctrine that we must seek to understand and expound. However, I am critical at points of the way in which *Presbyterianism*, which claims to represent and practise this form of church government, has built up its denominational edifice, often speciously, from the biblical material (and for that reason I find the claim it makes unconvincing in some important respects). The Reformation dictum *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*—"the reformed church is always fit to be reformed"—means that we should continually seek the reformation of the church according to biblical teaching whenever and wherever the church departs from it. I agree entirely with this sentiment, and it is in order to contribute to this process of reformation that this essay has been written. Nevertheless, the general principles, in the main, that I shall deal with in this essay are practicable in all denominations, notwithstanding the specific ecclesial forms with which they are usually, and often mistakenly, associated.

I must issue a disclaimer at the outset: I have not attempted to say everything about this subject that could be said. I shall be dealing with generalities for the most part, and some particular manifestations and examples of general principles. I seek primarily not to

be exhaustive but to address what I believe to be a continuing problem that the church faces in its understanding of its own nature, government and mission.

(ii) *The meaning of ekklesia*

With the exception of James 2:2 and Acts 19:37 the word translated “church” in the New Testament of the Authorised Version<sup>2</sup> is *ekklesia*,<sup>3</sup> meaning *an assembly* or *congregation*. This word is derived

2. The 1611 English translation referred to both as the Authorised Version and the King James Version is misnamed in both cases. It was never authorised and King James despised it because of its dependence on the 1560 Geneva Bible and on Tyndale, rather than on the Bishops’ Bible, the version the king had instructed the translators to revise. D. Daniell comments: “The new version [i.e. the 1611 version—SCP] was never authorised: it had no royal seal upon it at all. The designation ‘Authorised Version’ is the first of many myths about it. Why King James did not give his name to the work he had enthusiastically fathered is unknown; but he cannot have failed to notice its dependence on Geneva, and thus Tyndale.” Furthermore, “The full idolatry of the ‘Authorised’ version did not begin until the 1760s, but then grew steadily: the official revisers in 1881 declared in their Preface that the Authorised Version had been venerated as a classic since 1611, which is untrue. With that, there grew the worship of the Authorised Version as Sublime English Literature, a movement which reached its height in the first half of the twentieth century. This notion would have been incomprehensible, and indeed alarming, to earlier ages. Sir Philip Sidney, for example, in the 1580s, certainly recognised the value of the Psalms as models of poetic range in themselves; but they were the Word of God. Something called ‘literature’, detached from the truths of Scripture, would be impossible for him to grasp. God’s Word was vitally important: one’s soul’s life depended on it. There could be no other reason for receiving it.” (David Daniell, Introduction to the modern spelling edition of *Tyndale’s New Testament* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989], p. xiii f.).

3. The word used in James 2:2 is συναγωγή, which also means *an assembly*, from συναγω, *to bring together, gather together*. In Heb. 12:23 the term πανηγυρις is used, and often this is understood to be another term used in the New Testament to denote the body of Christ, or church. This is strictly incorrect however. Πανηγυρις means “*a general or national assembly, esp. a festal assembly in honour of a national god*” (Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* [Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1901 (Eighth Edition)], p. 1118a). In Heb. 12:23, however, the term is used *not* of the church of the firstborn, i.e. the body of Christ, but of the assembly of angels, since it is used appositionally in explication of the immediately preceding words, μυριασιν αγγελων, “*a myriad angels,*” not και εκκλησια πρωτοτοκων, “*the assembly of firstborn,*” which immediately follow it. Thus, “While the term itself causes no difficulties, since it can only have the common sense of ‘festal gathering,’ the grammatical order of the words is more

from the Greek verb *ekkaleo*, which is a compound word consisting of the verb *kaleo*, meaning *to call, summon*, and the preposition *ek*, meaning *from or out of*; *ekkaleo* thus means *to call out or forth, to summon forth*.<sup>4</sup> The noun, *ekklesia*, means *an assembly of those called out*. In its use of this word for the body of Christ, therefore, the New Testament stresses the fact that Christians are called out of the world of sin and unbelief into fellowship with God. There is another important dimension to the word *ekklesia* though; it was the Greek term for the

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difficult. It seems best, with most of the Greek fathers, to take *πανηγυρει* in apposition to *μυριασιν αγγελων*: 'you have come . . . to myriads of angels, to the festal assembly, and to the company of the firstborn.' The position of *πανηγυρει* is thus the same as that of the appositive *Ἱερουσαλημ επουρανιω*. The independent datives in vv. 22-24 are usually linked by *και*. The punctuation of the ancient MSS also supports this view. A description of this type of festal assembly may be found in the NT in Rev. 4. *πανηγυρις* never established itself as a Christian term." (Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1967], Vol. V, p. 722.) *Πανηγυρις* here thus refers to the festal gathering or general assembly of a vast number of angels, not to the assembly of firstborn. The writer of Hebrews is saying, in effect, "you have come to mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to the festal gathering of a myriad angels, and to the assembly of firstborn . . ." And although this *Πανηγυρις* of angels is here conceived of as part of a vast gathering of God's faithful servants, angels and the spirits of just men made perfect included, it is strictly not to be identified with the *εκκλησια πρωτοτοκων*, the "assembly of firstborn," which is the body of Christ.

On Acts 19:37 see the discussion at note 18.

In addition to this the Authorised Version translates the feminine definite article (*ἡ*) in 1 Pet. 5:13 as "church." Although it is safe to assume the referent here to be the *εκκλησια* in Babylon, strictly speaking the Authorised Version translates incorrectly—that is to say it interprets at this point rather than translating, when there is no good reason to justify this. A simple rendering of the Greek would have sufficed, viz "She who is at Babylon, elect with you, salutes you . . ." The Authorised Version follows the Geneva Bible in this error. Tyndale has "The companions of your election that are at Babylon, saluteth you . . ." again incorrect strictly speaking. Of course, the issue of where a translation becomes an interpretation is a difficult one and in this essay I do not seek to make any points respecting this issue except to say that in general a translation should be as literal as possible without making the vernacular difficult to understand, and that in the matter of the translation of *εκκλησια* and the use of the English word *church* both the Geneva and the Authorised Versions fail considerably in comparison to Tyndale, who excels beyond measure compared with all other English translations.

4. Liddell and Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 434b.

people organised as a political body. According to Liddell and Scott *ekklesia* means “an assembly of the citizens regularly summoned, the legislative assembly.”<sup>5</sup> The *ekklesia* was, from the fifth century B.C., the assembly of the *demos* in Athens and most Greek city states,<sup>6</sup> the *demos* being the classical Greek term for “the people as organized into a body politic.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, in choosing the word *ekklesia* to denote the assembly of Christians or body of Christ the Holy Spirit has emphasised not only the fact that Christians are called out of the world of sin and unbelief into covenant fellowship with God but also that this community or assembly of the faithful constitutes a holy nation under one Lord who is sovereign over the whole of life (1 Pet. 2:9). In claiming Christ as Lord, therefore, Christians declare allegiance to a new King whose jurisdiction is total and therefore whose law is to govern all human thoughts, actions and relationships with all other people and things. Allegiance to this new King and to his law comes before all else. There is a political dimension to Christ’s lordship over his people and thus there is a political dimension to the life of the Christian congregation also, and this political dimension has

5. *Ibid.*, p. 435a. According to J. Partsch, “The secular *ἐκκλησία* of antiquity is acknowledged to be an institution of the *πολις*. It is the assembly of the full citizenry of the *πολις* meeting for the execution of legal acts. Analogously one might call the Christian *ἐκκλησία* the assembly of full citizens of the heavenly city meeting for the execution of certain cultic acts . . . In the public legal character of Christian worship is reflected the fact that the Church is much nearer to political constructs like the kingdom and *πολις* than to voluntary unions and societies” (cited in K. L. Schmidt, “*ἐκκλησία*” in Kittel, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 514, n. 27). According to Liddell and Scott, *ἐκκλησία* is used in contrast to a mere *συλλογος*, which means simply “an assembly, concourse, meeting of persons, whether legal or riotous” (Liddell and Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 1455b). This latter term is not used in the New Testament (though the verb, *συλλεγω*, meaning *to bring together*, is used). In the koine Greek of the New Testament, however, *ἐκκλησία* seems also to be used in the sense of *συλλογος*; for example in Acts 19:32 the mob, which in v. 40 is clearly termed a *σοστραφη*, a *riotous gathering*, is termed an *ἐκκλησία*, which, although it may be claimed was a gathering of the citizens of Ephesus, and therefore properly termed an *ἐκκλησία*, is also clearly understood to be an unlawful *ἐκκλησία*, since the townclerk states that the matter causing the riot must be settled in the courts or else by a “lawful assembly,” i.e. a lawful *ἐκκλησία* (v. 38f.).

6. Kittel, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 513.

7. J. H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1901), p. 132.

been emphasised by the Holy Spirit in his choice of the word *ekklesia* to denote the congregation of Christians or body of Christ.

In the New Testament the word *ekklesia* is used of the body of Christ or assembly of Christians in three distinguishable senses: (1) to refer to the whole body of the elect that have been, are, or ever shall be united to Christ through faith (Mt. 16:18; Eph. 5:23, 24, 25f., 27, 29, 32; Col. 1:18, 24). This is the invisible catholic or universal church.<sup>8</sup> (2) The term is also used to refer to all those throughout the world who profess faith in Christ together with their children (Acts 5:11; 8:1,3; 1 Cor. 12:28 cf. Eph. 4:11-12; Eph. 3:10). This is the visible catholic church.<sup>9</sup> (3) The term *ekklesia* is, quite obviously, also used to refer to the body of believers in a particular location assembled together as a local congregation (e.g. Mt. 18:17; Acts 11:26; 14:23, 27; 15:4, 22; 16:5; Rom. 16:1, 4, 5, 16, 13; 1 Cor. 1:2; 4:17; 7:17; 11:16, 18; 16:11, 2 Cor. 8:1, 19; Col. 4:15; Rev. 2:1, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14 etc. The instances of the use of *ekklesia* in this sense are almost too numerous to cite). This is the visible church in a particular location organised into a congregation for the maintenance and practise of the Christian public religious cultus,—the *institutional* church.<sup>10</sup>

The term is also used in a sense inclusive of two or all of these senses however. For example, in Acts 2:47 we are told that “the Lord added to the *ekklesia* daily those who were being saved,” which can only mean that God was adding to the invisible catholic church, the visible catholic church and the local congregation or assembly at Jerusalem. The *ekklesia* here comprehends all the above senses therefore. Acts 7:38 refers to the *ekklesia* in the wilderness, i.e. the congregation of Israel, which at that time was the visible catholic church (sense 2) and the institutional church under the Mosaic economy (sense 3), but not the whole number of elect united to Christ through faith (the invisible catholic church).

Of course, when we use these terms and think about the church in this way we are not to imagine that these are three different churches. We are speaking of the same church in each case, but viewed from different perspectives. Nevertheless, the referents for

8. Cf. Westminster Confession of Faith, XXV.i.

9. Cf. *ibid.*, XXV.ii.      10. Cf. *ibid.*, XXV.iv.

each of the three definitions of *ekklesia* given above (invisible, visible and particular) are not identical. The invisible catholic church is the body of Christ. The visible catholic church is the body of Christ, but it is not co-terminous with the church invisible, since it refers to the church in time and history, whereas the church invisible refers to all who ever have been, are, or will be united to Christ through faith. Likewise, particular churches or groups of churches (denominations) are members of the visible catholic church,<sup>11</sup> but they are not co-terminous with the visible catholic church, since the visible catholic church may be represented by a variety of denominations and groups in any particular location. The church visible may also include hypocrites, i.e. non-believers who profess to be believers. The membership of a particular church, therefore, may not be co-terminous with the church invisible—i.e. those truly united to Christ by faith—in that particular congregation. Also, the life and calling of the church visible in any particular locality and of the visible catholic church throughout the world is much broader than that of any particular church or the sum of all particular churches, since the particular church is a local congregation organised for specific purposes, namely the practise of the Christian public religious cultus, whereas the existence and calling of the church visible embraces the whole of life and society.

It is also possible for a particular local congregation or church organisation or denomination to become so corrupt and apostate, both practically and credally, that it can in no sense be considered a Christian church any longer.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, because even the “pur-

11. *Ibid.*

12. This is certainly the case with the Roman Church, which is no longer Trinitarian in practice, even though it retains a formal attachment to the doctrine of the Trinity, since the position given to the virgin Mary means that the Roman Catholic deity is a quaternity consisting of Father, Son, Holy Spirit and the mother of God, Mary. The cult of the saints also makes the Roman Church practically polytheistic. All these errors are the consequence of one basic error, however, that of idolatry of a human institution and its traditions, which has made the Bible inferior to the concept of Roman Catholic tradition and authority. The Roman Church thus has no ultimate divinely revealed standard above itself, indeed no standard at all other than itself, to which it can look for correction. It is cut adrift from the authoritative word of God and inevitably sails further and further away from the truth revealed in Scripture.

est churches [i.e. particular congregations—SCP] under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan,"<sup>13</sup> we must not conclude that merely because someone is excommunicated from or chooses to leave a particular church that claims to be a Christian church he therefore automatically ceases to be a member of the invisible or visible catholic church.<sup>14</sup>

We must be careful, therefore, as we read the New Testament to observe how the term *ekklesia* is used in each case in order that we might understand what God is saying to us in the Scriptures. Yet in each case when we speak of the *ekklesia*, whether invisible, visible or particular, we refer to the one body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-13; Eph. 4:4-6). Christ has one body not three bodies.

(iii) *Etymology of the term church and its relation to ekklesia*

The term *church* (that is to say, its Greek cognate) is not used in the New Testament as a term for the body of Christ either in the broadest sense as the body of believers (considered as visible or invisible) or more narrowly as the institutional church, the local congregation or assembly of Christians in a particular locality meeting to maintain and practise the Christian public religious cultus. The word *church* comes from the Old English *cirice* or *circe*, which is derived from the Greek word *kurikon*, meaning "God's house," a popular fourth century form of the Greek word *kuriakon*, an adjective meaning *imperial, of the lord*. This Greek word was used of "the lord's house" (*to kuriakon doma*). The English word *church* is derived, via this route, from the Greek adjective *kuriakos*.<sup>15</sup> This adjective is only used twice in the New Testament, however, and in neither

13. Westminster Confession of Faith, XXV.v.

14. Such matters must be adjudicated according to the word of God by any particular church in which such a person subsequently seeks fellowship in order to determine whether the church he is no longer in fellowship with is indeed a Christian church and if so whether his excommunication or reason for leaving can be justified biblically. This is especially important to remember in an age of rampant apostasy such as ours is, even among Christian churches.

15. Liddell and Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 862. Kittel, *op. cit.*, Vol. III, p. 532, n. 92.

instance does it have reference to the church, i.e. the *ekklesia*, the body of Christ or congregation of Christians. In 1 Cor. 11:20 it is used of the *Lord's Supper*, and in Rev. 1:10 of the *Lord's Day*. Nowhere in the New Testament is this term used to refer to the Lord's house. Thus, strictly speaking, the notion or concept of the church is not part of the new covenant—though it is of course part of the old covenant, i.e. the Temple. The concept of the church—i.e. a building and its appurtenances, set apart as a special sanctuary for Christian worship—is not found in the New Testament and is not a feature of the new covenant.

It was in recognition of this fact that William Tyndale in his translation of the New Testament refused to use the word *church* to translate *ekklesia* and rendered it more correctly as *congregation* throughout. Nowhere in Tyndale's translation of the New Testament do we find the word *church* used of the assembly or community of believers. The New Testament does not identify the *ekklesia* as the house of the Lord, i.e. a building and its appurtenances, but as the people of God, called out of the world of sin and unbelief into fellowship with himself as his holy nation.

The English word *church* is thus a mistranslation of the Greek word *ekklesia*. There were no Christian churches in the New Testament; believers met in their homes or other places, but there were no specially designated buildings set apart for Christian worship. There were of course synagogues where Christians first began to worship as Christians on the Jewish sabbath, but they were soon obliged to leave these and worship elsewhere. Originally, however, the term *synagogue* did not refer to a building either, but to a gathering of people, an assembly, (from the Greek *sunago*, meaning *to gather together*), and was used of the local communities of Jews who met together on the sabbath for worship, instruction in the law and for educational and social purposes. That is to say, it referred to people, a community, not to a building, and only came to signify a building at a later date because of its use as a metonym for the building in which the community met. It was exactly the opposite with the term *church*; that is to say, the building, which is properly termed the church, came to signify the community of Christians that met in it.



Unfortunately, the translators of the Authorised Version chose not to follow Tyndale's superior translation in this matter and resorted to *church*, i.e. the Lord's house, as a translation of *ekklesia* where the latter refers to the congregation of Christians or body of Christ. They rejected the correct translation of *ekklesia* as *congregation* because this was the terminology of the Puritans, which they stated in their Preface they wished to avoid:

Lastly, we have on the one side avoided the scrupulosity of the Puritans, who leave the old ecclesiastical words, and betake them to other, as when they put *washing* for *baptism*, and *congregation* instead of *church*: as also on the other side, we have shunned the obscurity of the papists, in their *azymes*, *tunic*, *rational*, *holocausts*, *prepuce*, *Pasche*, and a number of such like, whereof their late translation is full, and that of purpose to darken the sense, that since they must needs translate the Bible, yet by the language thereof, it may be kept from being understood.<sup>16</sup>

The problem with this translation of *ekklesia* as *church* becomes apparent when we compare the Authorised Version's translation of the Old Testament Hebrew term *qahal* with the LXX translation of that term into Greek. The term *qahal* means *congregation* or *assembly* and is translated as *congregation* throughout the Old Testament of the Authorised Version. The LXX translates *qahal* as *ekklesia*.<sup>17</sup> We should naturally expect the term *ekklesia* to be translated as *congregation* in the New Testament therefore. But we do not find this in the Authorised Version. Instead it is translated as *church*.

16. "The Translators to the Reader" from the Preface to the 1611 translation in G. Bray, *Documents of the English Reformation* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1994), p. 435. Unlike the "Epistle Dedicatory" "The Translators to the Reader" is never printed in modern editions of the Authorised Version. The 1611 translation was an Anglican translation of the Bible, not a Puritan translation, and fell short of Puritan ideals in a number of ways. It did represent Anglicanism at its moderate, Calvinistic high-water mark, however.

17. The Hebrew *qahal*, which is also translated in the LXX by other Greek terms, particularly συναγωγή, means simply *an assembly* or *congregation* of any kind. Συναγωγή is also used in the LXX to translate the Hebrew *'edah*, which can mean a congregation considered apart from its act of meeting, an idea not associated with *qahal*. Εκκλησία, however, is not used in the LXX to translate *'edah* (P. S. Minear, "Church, Idea of" in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962], Vol. 1, p. 608a).

The inconsistency of this translation becomes evident when the New Testament cites an Old Testament text containing the word *qahal* in the original Hebrew. For example, Heb. 2:12 reads in the Authorised Version: "I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the *church* will I sing praise unto thee." The term *church* here is *ekklesia* in Greek, a term that the LXX used to translate *qahal* in the Old Testament. Heb. 2:12 is a direct quotation from Ps. 22:22, which the Authorised Version translates thus: "I will declare thy name unto my brethren: in the midst of the *congregation* will I praise thee." Since the LXX here translates *qahal* as *ekklesia* we should expect the English term *congregation* in the Heb. 2:12 text just as in the Ps. 22:22 text. The former is a direct quotation from the Old Testament. Yet the Authorised Version takes no account of this compelling reason for translating *ekklesia* as *congregation* and mistranslates at this point. In doing this the Authorised Version follows the translators of the Geneva Bible, who perpetrated this error before them. It is a matter of wonder that the translators of the Geneva Bible committed this error, however, since although a reason for a politically correct (rather than a philologically correct) translation can easily be found for the Authorised Version, I can think of no reason for such an error on the part on the translators of the Geneva Bible, which was a superior translation to the Authorised Version and, unlike the Authorised Version, written in the language that the English actually spoke, as was Tyndale's translation.

The inconsistency of the Authorised Version's translation of *ekklesia* can be further illustrated by its avoidance of the English word *church* to translate *ekklesia* where the latter does not refer to the body of Christ or to the assemblies of Christians. Indeed, were *ekklesia* to be rendered *church* in such passages this translation would immediately be shown to be hopelessly incorrect and thoroughly misleading. For example, in Acts 19:32, 39 and 41 *ekklesia* is correctly translated as *assembly*. The reference here is to a mob of Ephesian citizens. The use of the word *church* to describe this gathering would obviously be untenable.<sup>18</sup> This only shows, however, just how much

18. At v. 37 the Authorised Version further confuses the matter by rendering ἱεροσυλοῦς, a term that means *temple robbers* or *sacilegious persons*, as "rob-

our acceptance of the word *church* as a translation of *ekklesia*, that is to say, just how much a preconception fostered by over four hundred years of mistranslation, has coloured our reading of Scripture.

The Authorised Version's translation of *ekklesia* is consistently confused and highly misleading—i.e. it mistranslates the term throughout. Whatever the reason for these errors in the past and the problems and misunderstandings they have created and helped to ingrain in people's minds over the years, it is important that we

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bers of churches," which, of course, would have been a quite adequate and acceptable translation had *ἐκκλησία* not been rendered "church," but which, in any case, would have been better translated as "sacrilegious persons" in this context. The translators of the Authorised Version had a better example to follow here in the Geneva Bible, which refers simply to the committing of sacrilege. It would seem the translators of the Authorised Version here followed Tyndale, who also rendered the term as "robbers of churches." But Tyndale did not confuse the English term *church* with the Greek term *ἐκκλησία*, which he nowhere translated as "church." In Tyndale's translation "robbers of churches" makes good sense and is consistent since it refers only and obviously to religious buildings, whereas in the Authorised Version, because of its constant mistranslation of *ἐκκλησία* as "church," this usage only serves to confuse matters by using the English word *church* both incorrectly and inconsistently. Had the Authorised Version followed Tyndale's translation of *ἐκκλησία* also the English speaking world would have been saved four centuries of misunderstanding.

A good example of the kind of misunderstanding this mistranslation has caused was afforded me in conversation with a Presbyterian minister. While expressing my conviction that Christians need to become involved in the political process in order that they may be salt and light in this important sphere of social activity the minister expressed sympathy and indeed enthusiasm, but also expressed reservations about encouraging his own flock to get too involved because, he said, there was work that needed to be done "at the church," which could not be done if his congregation's time was too much taken up with other things. And the nature of this important work? Decorating the church building, keeping it in good repair, and "weeding the garden" (seriously!). This is weeding while Rome burns! Perhaps if this minister had been pressed for a definition of the term *church* and its relation to *ἐκκλησία* he may well have acknowledged that the latter is the community not the building. But this minister was not ordinarily conscious of such a distinction. His thinking about the church in an everyday sense was totally confused. It was also, I believe, unfaithful to Scripture. Are we really to think that God is more concerned about the church garden than his people's involvement in politics when the nation is sinking under God's judgement for its sins? Political sins receive far more condemnation in the Bible than gardening sins; in fact I cannot really think of any gardening sins at all. Let no one think, therefore, that this is not a vitally important point that deserves our urgent and serious consideration.

now recognise that the Greek term *ekklesia* does not refer to the Lord's house, but to the body of Christ or community of believers and to the assembly of this community in a particular locality for specific purposes.

(iv) *Definition of terms*

There are two terms used constantly in this essay that call for definition at the outset. It is important that the reader bear these definitions in mind throughout this essay.

(1) *Church*. In this essay I shall not propose or adopt the idea of changing common usage at so late a date. The term *church* is now so strongly attached to the New Testament *ekklesia* that it would be futile to attempt to correct this error. Nonetheless, a definition of the term as it is used in this essay is necessary in order to avoid misunderstanding.

I shall throughout rest of this essay use the term Church, with the first letter capitalised, to refer to the body of Christ considered as the institutional Church, and the capitalised form, CHURCH, to refer to the body of Christ considered in the broadest sense as the people of God. This usage is not meant to imply that the institutional Church is not the body of Christ, nor that the body of Christ does not exist as an institution. I have adopted it purely for the purpose of clarity. Nor am I suggesting that this usage should be adopted generally. It is not my common usage. I adopt it here merely for the purpose of limiting confusion and misunderstanding in this essay. My reasons for this usage will become apparent later.

(2) *Institutional*. In this essay a great deal of reference will be made to the *institutional* Church in order to distinguish the organised Christian public cultus from the CHURCH considered as the body of Christ in the broader sense, which comprehends the institutional Church but is not limited to it. My use of this term also needs clarification and explanation. We use the term in two different senses in relation to the Church, often without having any clear understanding of the different meanings that can be and are assigned to it and often without being fully aware ourselves of the

different ways in which we use the word. The term can be used legitimately of the Church in the two following senses: (a) to mean a *legally defined societal structure or organisation*,—i.e. a corporate body or organisation recognised legally as forming part of the societal structure of a nation—as the term is used of other societal structures and organisations; and (b) to mean *a society instituted by God's word*.

The Christian Church did not exist institutionally in the first century in sense *a*. But it did exist in sense *b*. This makes our discussion of the Church's institutional role today in terms of biblical and especially New Testament precedent more difficult because the Church does exist in both senses in Western society; and I believe it should exist in both senses. But it may be asked, "How does one derive the institutional Church as a valid concept in sense *a* if it did not exist as such in the New Testament?" This is where we are in the realm of what "by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture."<sup>19</sup> The answer to this question is in two parts: *first*, the Church as a legally defined societal structure or organisation is implied in, or to be deduced from, the fact that God's law is to be the law of all nations and societies. God commands all individuals and nations *as* nations to submit to the yoke and discipline of his law (Ps. 2:10-12 cf. Mt. 28: 18-20). Therefore sense *a* must follow sense *b* as a good and necessary consequence of the conversion and disciplining of the nations to Christ and his law, which is the result of the Great Commission (Mt. 28:18-20). The fact that the Church did not exist institutionally in sense *a* in the New Testament period is only because the nations into which the gospel came had not converted at that time (though many individuals and families among those nations had converted). The conversion of the nations took time, hard work and the blood of many martyrs, the apostles themselves being in the vanguard of this process. That being the case, we should not expect the conversion of the nations in their own lifetime. The spilling of their own blood was part of the process, in God's will, for bringing the nations to Christ. Eventually the nations began converting as nations. But the institutionalisation

19. Westminster Confession of Faith, I.vi.

of the Church in sense *a* had to wait. This explains the fact that the Christian Church did not exist institutionally in sense *a* during the first century and thus in the New Testament Scriptures.

*Secondly*, the pre-Christian Church did exist institutionally in sense *a* under the old covenant. We have in the Old Testament an example of the Church's pre-Christian institutional existence. Of course there are great discontinuities (e.g. the sacrificial system, the priesthood, system of public worship etc.); but there are also continuities. The coming of Jesus Christ did not set aside the fact that God's law is to become the law of the nations. It expedited that process. And Christ's commission to his people is that they should continue the work he came to do in this respect (Mt. 28:18-20). Thus, just as there existed under the old covenant an institutional Church in sense *a*, i.e. an organised public religious cultus with a legally defined societal structure, so also under the new covenant the Church should exist as an organised public religious cultus with a legally defined societal structure. There is continuity in the sense that the Christian Church should exist institutionally as part of the nation's societal structure, since this is implied in the Great Commission, but also discontinuity, in that there is no direct equivalence because the cultus of the new covenant Church is not sacrificial, not administered by a set-apart priesthood, and does not derive its form of government from the Levitical model. Also, the Old Testament *qahal* (congregation) was the nation of Israel politically. There is discontinuity here also, since the Christian CHURCH (the body of Christ) is not a particular ethnic community, but rather a new community, the members of which are people from all the nations adopted into God's family through union with Christ. The continuity principle, for our purposes in this essay, exists in the realisation of an institute of God's word on the societal and legal levels in the life of the nation. It is thus legitimate to speak of a national Christian Church—i.e. a Church or group or Churches recognised legally as forming part of the societal structure of a nation—without implying that the CHURCH, the body of Christ, is coterminous with the organisation of the Church in such an institutional way. In the old covenant this was different, in that one had to become a mem-

ber of Israel to become a member of the pre-Christian institutional Church.

In the new covenant era this realisation of the institution of God's word must be in accordance with the new covenant administration of God's covenant of grace. Therefore the Christian Church exhibits all the discontinuities with the Old Testament Church that we should expect, given the different natures of their religious cultus. But the necessity of the realisation of the institutions of God's word legally in society remains unchanged. The Church, therefore, is recognised institutionally, or should be, in sense *a*, i.e. as a legally defined societal structure, by its existence as an organised public religious cultus.

The establishment of the institutional Church in sense *a* above should, therefore, follow the fact that it exists by God's will in sense *b* as the nations are converted to Christ and disciplined to his law. *Ergo*, the Church should be institutional in both senses defined above, though it does not always exist institutionally in sense *a*, especially where the preaching of the gospel has not yet led to the conversion of the nation. The institutional Church in a Christian nation is thus the body of Christ as it exists as a legally defined societal structure with specific functions in society, namely the maintenance of the Christian public religious cultus instituted by God's word. Legal accountability for this organisation rests with its officers or those who rule. But, as we shall see, the institutional Church is only one aspect of the body of Christ and its function on earth, and important as this God-ordained institution is, the body of Christ, or CHURCH in the wider sense, must never be reduced simply to the institutional cultus and organisation.

## THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

So far we have looked at the etymology of the term *ekklesia* (translated as *church* in the A.V.), the different ways in which this term is employed in Scripture, and how the Church is defined *institutionally*. We have seen that although in the New Testament era the Christian Church did not exist as a legally defined societal structure, it did exist as an institute of God's word, and that the existence of the Church as a legally defined societal structure is the inevitable consequence of the Great Commission and the CHURCH's success in its calling to make disciples of the nations. Before going any further, however, we must understand the *biblical* definition of the CHURCH (i.e. the CHURCH in the broadest sense, not merely the Church as an institution), since only by keeping this clearly in our minds shall we avoid coming to false conclusions about the nature and function of the CHURCH. This biblical definition is like a compass to keep us from straying into erroneous notions about the CHURCH.

The Bible *defines* the CHURCH as the *body of Christ* (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18, 24; 1 Cor. 12:12-13, 27-28; Rom. 12:5). This is the company of those who have been called out of the world of sin and unbelief into the kingdom and household of God by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 3:3, 5; Eph. 2:19), the whole body of those united to Christ by faith, whom Christ loved and for whom he offered himself up as a propitiation for sin in order to redeem them from the curse of the law and reconcile them to God (Eph. 5:25; Rom. 3:25; 1 Jn 4:10; Gal. 3:13; Rom. 5:10)—the catholic CHURCH.<sup>20</sup> This CHURCH exists by divine will; it is the product of God's action in regenerating men, not the product of human will. Jesus said of

20. *Ibid.*, XXV.1.



Peter's faith: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar Jona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." And he tells us that it is on this rock—i.e. the faith that is the gift of God, the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of man—that he will build his CHURCH (Mt. 16:17-18). The CHURCH is the body of Christ, the company of the regenerate.

Whatever other terms are used of the CHURCH, whatever other definitions come into play as we seek to understand the nature of the CHURCH, we must always ultimately come back to this one starting point. This definition is the touchstone by which our doctrine of the CHURCH must be guided. Obviously, our discussion cannot end here. But it must start with this definition and always refer back to it. Our doctrine of the CHURCH must be consistent with this definition at all points, and the extent to which it departs from this definition is the extent to which it is erroneous.

However, this definition alone, although it is the definition that the New Testament gives us, does not account for all the biblical data bearing on the nature of the CHURCH in its visible manifestation in the world. Life is complex and biblical revelation gives us historical narrative in down to earth, realistic terms that takes account of that complexity. General definitions have to be applied. A number of sub-definitions have therefore come into use in order to account for all the biblical data contributing to a comprehensive doctrine of the CHURCH. These sub-definitions are very proper and useful, and no criticism of them is made here. In fact I use them approvingly. But we must understand that these are not biblical definitions. That is to say, the Bible does not use these definitions. The Bible defines the CHURCH simply as the body of Christ. These are definitions devised by men trying faithfully to come to terms with the variety of statements that the Bible makes about the CHURCH and attempting to understand the Scriptures in the light of the historic manifestation of the CHURCH on earth.

The two common pairs of definitions used by theologians are: (a) the CHURCH *visible* and *invisible*,<sup>21</sup> and (b) the CHURCH *militant* and

21. The term *invisible* has been criticised by some as an unsuitable term to define Christ's CHURCH. See for example John Murray, "The Church: Its

*triumphant*. It is important to remember that these terms are not used to designate different CHURCHES, but the same CHURCH, the body of Christ, looked at from different perspectives. Let us look briefly at these two pairs of definitions.

(a) The CHURCH *visible* consists of all those throughout the world who profess faith in Christ together with their children<sup>22</sup> (1 Cor. 1:2; 7:14; Acts 2:39). According to R. B. Kuiper these are those whose names appear on Church registers.<sup>23</sup> This is a bureaucratic definition that I shall reject. I do not think it can be established biblically. In fact, there is not a single shred of biblical evidence to support such a notion, which is essentially quite a modern idea.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, despite the totally inadequate nature of this definition, I think what Kuiper was trying to get at was the notion that the CHURCH *visible* consists of members of local Churches. Ordinarily, the CHURCH *visible* (i.e. those professing faith in Christ together with

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Definition in Terms of 'Visible' and 'Invisible' Invalid," in *The Collected Works of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), vol. I, pp. 231-236. It should be noted that Murray also criticises the use of the term *visible* as a description of the CHURCH. The term *invisible* is used to indicate the fact that only God knows the heart of man and therefore only he knows infallibly who are elect and regenerate. As fallible creatures with limited knowledge, we must accept men into the fellowship of the Church as regenerate believers on the basis of their profession and works, even if these prove at the last to have been hypocritical. Neither the Church nor its officers and ministers can know the hearts of its members. It is in this sense that the word *invisible* is used of the CHURCH. Therefore profession and works, not the ability to relate a personal religious conversion experience, are the criteria for adult membership in the Church. Those Churches that assume the ability to judge a man's standing in the faith by his relation of a conversion experience assume too much of their own abilities, arrogate to themselves the prerogative of God, and blur the legitimate distinction between the CHURCH *visible* and *invisible*.

22. Westminster Confession of Faith, XXV.ii.

23. R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), p. 26.

24. I realise that a record of one's ancestry was considered important for the exiles returning from captivity (Neh. 7), but I do not think this can be used to support the notion that the CHURCH *visible* consists of those whose names appear on Church registers. The two kinds of records are not comparable nor do they perform the same function. The ancestral records of the people of Israel were concerned with racial descent, and while registration in the ancestral records was considered essential for the priesthood it was not essential for membership of the covenant community.

their children) in a particular area should manifest itself *institutionally* as a local Church. But the CHURCH visible should not be identified as coterminous with the institutional Church, which is one expression or manifestation of the CHURCH among many, namely, the body of Christ manifested as an organised public religious cultus, i.e. a particular covenant community assembling together for corporate worship, ministry of the word, administration of the sacraments and diaconal ministry. That is to say, the CHURCH visible manifests itself institutionally in history as a local Church. But the institutional Church is not an exhaustive manifestation of the CHURCH (the body of Christ) on earth. The CHURCH manifests itself in history in other ways as well as in the form of the institutional Church. The CHURCH visible, i.e. the body of Christ, cannot be reduced merely to the institutional Church therefore. The two are not coterminous. The local Church as an institution is a much narrower concept than the CHURCH visible. The institutional Church is thus the CHURCH visible covenanted together as a local community for specific purposes, namely the practice and maintenance of the Christian public religious cultus.<sup>25</sup>

The CHURCH *invisible* consists solely of those who are regenerate, born from above into the kingdom and household of God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, faith itself being the gift of God through which the elect are brought into covenant fellowship with God.

These two, the CHURCH visible and invisible, should ideally be identical, but in fact they are not. Some profess faith who are hypocrites, some because they are deceived, others because they are deceivers. Since the CHURCH cannot know infallibly who are regenerate it must accept false professors until by their words or actions they demonstrate their hypocrisy. Profession of faith and works consistent with that profession are thus the criteria for determining membership of the CHURCH visible. Nevertheless, when we speak of the CHURCH visible and invisible we are speaking of the same CHURCH, the body of Christ, not two different CHURCHES, and we

25. See Appendix A, "Some Problems with Presbyterian Ecclesiology," sections 1 and 2.

should perhaps, as someone has suggested, speak of the CHURCH invisible and the CHURCH visible rather than of the visible CHURCH and the invisible CHURCH. Nevertheless, we have to posit the distinction between the CHURCH visible and invisible because our knowledge and understanding is fallible. But there is no CHURCH invisible to God. The CHURCH is totally visible to God and he makes no such distinction. We make the distinction because as human beings our knowledge is fallible. The distinction between the CHURCH visible and invisible is thus merely a semantic tool necessitated by the fallibility of human knowledge.

(b) The CHURCH *triumphant*, according to Kuiper, is the CHURCH in heaven and the CHURCH *militant* is the CHURCH on earth.<sup>26</sup> For the purpose of this essay I do not have any great problem with this definition, but it is vague and misleading and I think it would be better stated that the CHURCH triumphant is the body of Christ as it is definitively in Christ and will one day be manifested in glory,<sup>27</sup> i.e. in the *resurrection*. In the matter of our future hope the New Testament places the emphasis not on “heaven” but on the *resurrection*. Our theology should be taken from the Bible not Vergil’s *Aeneid* Book Six. Too many Christians talk of heaven, and the image this conjures up is more akin to the Elysian Fields than the biblical vision of a resurrected life on earth. Heaven is the abode of God, so to speak: “Our Father in heaven . . .”<sup>28</sup> The kingdom of heaven is

26. R. B. Kuiper, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

27. This is not the traditional definition but it is the best sense I can make of the term *church triumphant* in the light of biblical teaching. Kuiper’s—i.e. the traditional—definition seems to be so inadequate and ill-informed biblically that a better definition is called for, unless we understand “in heaven” to mean in God’s plan or as God sees the CHURCH in his ultimate purpose and decree (cf. Eph. 5:26-27), definitions that I doubt can be pressed into the service of Kuiper or those who originated the term *church triumphant*.

28. I do not think it is appropriate at all for Christians to speak of “going to heaven,” since this evidences more of pagan ideas of the afterlife, of the purification of the soul by separation from the body, than it does of the Christian belief in deliverance from *sin* and fellowship with God through Christ. The idea of salvation as a non-corporeal existence of the soul in an afterlife, which was common throughout the Graeco-Roman world, is alien to the Bible, which speaks not of life in “heaven” but of a physical, tangible life in the *resurrection*, Christ himself showing us the physical nature of the resurrection body by his appearances after his own resurrection: “See my hands and my

thus a synonym for the kingdom of God (cf. for example Mt. 3:2 and Mk 1:5). The CHURCH *militant* is the body of Christ as manifested in history.

What I shall be dealing with in this essay, however, is the CHURCH *visible* and *militant*. The two are not exactly coterminous, though they should be. The CHURCH *militant* does not include hypocrites and false believers, since it is the body of Christ manifested in history and such hypocrites are not truly members of the body of Christ. The CHURCH *visible* does include hypocrites and false believers since this is the CHURCH that is visible to men, that is to say it consists of those who are accepted as members of the CHURCH by men because of their profession and works. To the extent that members professing faith and showing works consistent with such a profession delude themselves and the CHURCH of which they profess to be members, and to the extent that such are accepted by the CHURCH as true believers, the CHURCH *visible* does include hypocrites.

There are two ways of viewing the CHURCH *visible* and *militant*: *first*, simply as the company or community of the redeemed, wherever they are and in whatever situation, vocation etc. they find themselves. Thus, the CHURCH *visible* and *militant* is the body of Christians wherever they are and in whatever they are doing: the Christian teacher, business man, house-wife, mother, parent, barmaid, butcher, baker, candlestick maker, at work, at play, at prayer,

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feet, that it is I myself; touch me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Lk. 24:39). The "intermediate state" is not what most Christians refer to when they speak of "heaven" (though admittedly they are often confused about the difference between this and the resurrection); and though the Bible gives us reason to believe that there is a consciousness with God after death but before the resurrection, it gives us very little information about the nature of such an existence. The most we can say is that it is a veiled teaching (cf. Dt. 29:29) and that such a state is a state of *death* not of life. Those Protestants who reject this must consider that in that case they have no biblical ground for rejecting the Roman Catholic practice of asking the saints to pray for them, since God forbids communication with the *dead* not the living. Christ's statement, that God is the God of the living not of the dead (Mt. 22:32) was made in the context of a dispute with the Sadducees over the *resurrection*, not the "intermediate state" or "heaven."

at home etc. The New Testament uses the term *ekklesia* in this sense in Acts 5:11 and 8:1, 3. *Second*, the CHURCH visible and militant can be viewed as an organised public religious cultus, a community of believers covenanted together for the preaching and teaching of the Christian Scriptures, administration of the sacraments, corporate praise, worship and prayer, and the mutual support and encouragement of each other as a community of faith. That is to say the company of believers can be seen also as an *institutional Church*, a community of believers united as a particular congregation. It is in the Church as an institution that the discrepancy between the CHURCH invisible and visible becomes most apparent. The institutional Church does not create this discrepancy; i.e. the discrepancy is not a result of the fact that the institutional Church must exist (as it must by divine prescription). But it is in the institutional Church that the problem is most obviously manifested, especially in an age of apostasy such as the twentieth century when so few Churches can be found that have not apostatised doctrinally and compromised themselves with secular humanism.

Nonetheless, the existence and assembling of the body of Christ as a local institution is biblical and commanded by God's word. It is an institute of God's word. Whatever criticisms are made of the institutional Church, valid though they often are, especially in an age of egregious apostasy, it must not be forgotten that it exists by the institution of God's word and its functions are prescribed and defined clearly in God's word.

It is clear from a consideration of these points that we use the word *church* in two different but overlapping senses. This has led to some confusion, and often it has meant that the body of Christ has been reduced to the institutional Church. This is a great error, and in turn leads to great error. For example, John Murray gives an excellent biblical definition of the CHURCH: "The church is the assembly of the covenant people of God, the congregation of believers, the household of God, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ. It consists of men and women<sup>29</sup> called by God the

29. I assume that Murray used these terms in a generic sense, i.e. that he includes infants and children in this definition also.

Father into the fellowship of his Son, sanctified in Christ Jesus, regenerated by his Spirit, and united in the faith and confession of Christ Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Where there is such a communion gathered in Jesus' name, there is the church of God. And all throughout the world answering to this description constitute the church of God universal."<sup>30</sup> To this it needs only to be added that the words "and confession of Christ Jesus . . ." must not be understood to exclude regenerate infants.

Unfortunately, Murray then goes on, rather inconsistently, to redefine the CHURCH exclusively by its institutional aspect: "It is all-important to bear in mind that the church of God is an institution. It may *never* be conceived of apart from the *organization* of the people of God visibly expressed and in discharge of the *ordinances* instituted by Christ."<sup>31</sup> This is an extremely reductionist and unbiblical definition. Jesus never spoke of his CHURCH in this constricted way, nor of building it in such a limited fashion. On the contrary, he implicitly gave the lie to such a cramped and rigid definition when he said: "Truly I say to you, whatever you shall 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, there am I in their midst" (Mt. 18:18-20). It is to be noted here that the power of binding and loosing is not something given only to the Church officers, i.e. to the government of the Church, since Christ says "Again . . . if two of you agree on earth . . . it shall be done." The prayer of just two united Christians will have binding and loosing power. It is certainly true that the power of binding and loosing belongs to the whole congregation, even where such is mediated representatively through the eldership.

30. Murray, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 237f. He goes on to point out that the CHURCH exists only as a result of God's action. Only God, not men, can bring the true CHURCH into being: "The church is an institution existing by God's action, maintained by his grace, and directed by his Spirit. As it exists by God's action, so it must be conducted in accord with his prescriptions. Its sphere of operation is defined by God himself and revealed to us in his Word" (*ibid.*, p. 238).

31. *Ibid.*, my italics.

Hence Jesus says "Tell it to the church" (Mt. 18:17)—i.e. the *ekklesia*, the whole congregation.<sup>32</sup> But the power of binding and loosing belongs also to as few as two united Christians because, says Jesus, "where two or three have gathered together in my name, there am I in their midst." There is no requirement or even mention here of the CHURCH organised as an institution, but simply of two Christians

32a. In recognition of this the Westminster Assembly of Divines in its Directory of Excommunication required that the sentence of excommunication should only be carried out with the consent of the congregation (see Stephen C. Perks, "The Westminster Assembly and Church Discipline" in *Christianity and Society* [April, 1995], Vol. V, No. 2, pp. 12-15). Scriptural corroboration of this principle is found in 2 Cor. 2:6, which states: "Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many" (Authorised Version. Cf. 1 Cor. 5:1-4). The words translated "of many" here (ὑπο τῶν πλειονῶν) mean literally "by the greater part"—i.e. the majority, which is what πλειονῶν (compar. of πῶλος) means. It may be deduced from this that the sentence of excommunication is to be determined by a majority vote of the congregation.

b. It may be asserted that binding and loosing is an act of authority and therefore a function of the eldership (the officers) of the Church. Even if this were true, it would not be valid to conclude that it is a function *exclusively* of the eldership. Perhaps it would be better stated that the power of binding and loosing belongs to the CHURCH whenever and wherever it is assembled, even though those assembled should be as few as two believers, and to the officers of the Church as representatives of the Church, elected by the congregation, which thereby delegates power to the eldership. That such authority belongs properly to the congregation is clearly indicated by that fact that the congregation elects its elders. Such an election is fundamentally an act of authority by the congregation prior to the existence of the eldership. The congregation also excommunicates apostates (see note 31a above). Authority in the Church, therefore, in the first instance, is delegated by Christ to the congregation (i.e. to the male heads of households who exercise the right to vote), which elects rulers (elders) according to God's word, who then rule as representatives of God's people. Furthermore, the authority of the eldership does not come directly from God, but from God's word, and thus in all respects it is subject to that word. Elders rule with the authority of God's word and the consent of the congregation, which elects them to office according to God's word. Even so, as Christ makes clear in Mt. 18:18-20, the power of binding and loosing does not belong exclusively to the congregation conceived as a local institutional Church or to its eldership, but to Christ's CHURCH (i.e. his body) wherever two or three are gathered in his name, regardless of whether those so assembled are represented by elders. Thus, elders (Church officers) are not essential to the being of the Church, but only to the *well-being* of the Church, while the power of binding and loosing belongs to Christ's CHURCH wherever and whenever it is assembled with or without elders (see the discussion in Appendix A, sections 1 and 2). This means that the authority of the congregation is prior to and the basis of the authority delegated to elders.



united in purpose and prayer. Neither is there the requirement or even mention of elders convened to give such meetings formal sanction as the Church of Christ.<sup>33</sup>

33a. It has been suggested that such an interpretation would in principle permit women to become elders. The argument goes like this: women can exercise the power of the keys, which is understood to be the power of binding and loosing, and which is further taken to be necessarily an act of authority, *ergo* women may exercise authority in the Church, and since women may exercise authority in the Church they may become elders also. I do not think the Bible will permit this line of reasoning, if only for the obvious reason that women are specifically forbidden to teach or exercise authority over men (1 Tim. 2:12). I make this point here in order to clarify my position. My above argument respecting the power of binding and loosing does not imply that women may become elders or that they may exercise authority over men in any sense in the Church. Such an inference would be quite contrary to my position and I hereby repudiate any such suggestion. What I have said is that the power of binding and loosing belongs to the CHURCH, the whole body of Christ, and to as few as two or three meeting together as the body of Christ, i.e. in Christ's name (Mt. 18:20). But there is no Church assembly, be it so few as two or three, where a woman may exercise authority over men. My point is that although the power of binding and loosing is an act of authority when exercised by those appointed to office in the Church, it is not necessarily coterminous with such office, and therefore may be exercised apart from the authority of ordained office-bearers by two or three members of Christ's body meeting together and united in purpose according to God's will. In other words, the power of binding and loosing is not *always* an act of ecclesiastical authority.

b. The Pharisees understood the term *binding and loosing* to refer to the making of laws and regulations that, although not in the written Torah, were, supposedly, made binding by God in heaven—i.e. by God's authority because they were made by the teachers of the law who sat in the seat of Moses (Mt. 23:2). Thus, for the Rabbis to bind was to forbid and to loose was to permit. Binding and loosing was, therefore, for them the power and authority to lay down law for others to follow. This interpretation, however, fails to find exegetical justification for the Christian, since although Christ was using a term commonly understood to mean this by the Pharisees his use of it to mean the same thing would clearly contradict his specific criticisms of such regulations and laws (the traditions of the elders) enumerated by the Pharisees as part of the oral Torah, which for them was an essential component of the Torah (see Mt. 15:1-14). Furthermore, Christ would not have permitted his disciples to break a regulation that had been ratified in heaven, that is by God's authority, as he clearly did with regard to these judgements of the Pharisees and elders. The only viable interpretation of this term in the light of Christ's teaching on the law and his constant rebuke of the Pharisees for adding their own rulings and traditions to the law of God is that such binding and loosing is, in fact, judgement that is fully in accord with God's written law—i.e. the application of God's law revealed in Scripture, not the addition of human laws or traditions

Again Jesus says: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar Jona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church" (Mt. 16:17-18). The faith that comes from God as a result of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life (Eph. 2:8; Gal. 5:22) is the rock upon which Christ builds his CHURCH. Christ does not state that the organisation and visible expression of the CHURCH in the discharge of the ordinances instituted by himself is essential to the CHURCH's being, but only to the CHURCH's well-being (Eph. 4:11-13). There is no mention in Mt. 16:17-18 of such a requirement for the existence of the CHURCH, no indication or suggestion that the CHURCH cannot be conceived of apart from such institutions. To use Murray's own words, "The church is the . . . congregation of believers, the household of God, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ. It consists of men and women called by God the Father into the fellowship of his Son, sanctified in Christ Jesus, regenerate by his Spirit, and united in the faith and confession of Christ Jesus as Lord and Saviour. *Where there is such a communion gathered in Jesus' name, there is the church of God.*"

The CHURCH may certainly be conceived of apart from the institutional organisation precisely because Christ himself so conceived of it. Murray's definition—i.e. the strict identification of the body of Christ as coterminous in every respect with the institutional Church—severely limits the body of Christ in its mission and function in the world. Indeed, it cuts the body of Christ off almost totally from the cultural mandate.

This conclusion Murray spells out—though perhaps unconsciously—when he goes on to speak of the functions of the CHURCH (remember he defines the CHURCH as the body of Christ—i.e. the community of the regenerate, united to Christ through faith) with-

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to God's revealed will. Only judgements that are in accord with God's revealed law-word are binding in heaven, no matter how binding they may be considered by mere men, be those laws judicial or ecclesiastical. Christ was, therefore, *correcting*, not *validating*, the Rabbis' understanding of binding and loosing.

out in the slightest indicating that the body of Christ has a much wider and more comprehensive commission than the institutional Church. The four areas in which the CHURCH (body of Christ) is to function, according to Murray, are (1) worship, (2) proclamation, (3) government (of the Church) and (4) diaconal ministry.<sup>34</sup> By identifying the body of Christ as strictly coterminous with the institutional Church Murray leaves the CHURCH—i.e. the body of Christ—helpless to affect and preserve the culture in which it lives by a “hands on” encounter with and in that culture, thereby denying to the community of faith the means of bringing the whole of society into conformity with the whole counsel of God’s word. It is as if the CHURCH and society were the crews of two different ships. The most that the CHURCH can do is to bellow from its own ship to the ship of culture information about how the ship of culture should steer away from the rocks that threaten to destroy it. But the CHURCH can never get into the ship of culture and do the steering. Outside the Church meeting, the ability of Christ’s CHURCH to influence culture must be limited to proclamation. It is this unbiblical reductionism, this identification of the calling and ministry of the CHURCH (body of Christ) in the world with the legitimate, God-prescribed, but much narrower calling of the Church as an institution, that has vitiated the CHURCH’s ability to affect society for good, to leaven the whole lump of society, in the twentieth century. And it is this narrowly institutional and essentially clergy-centred view of the CHURCH’s calling that must be overturned if the CHURCH is, once again, to be a transforming influence in the nation.

A good example of the problems resulting from this restricted definition of the CHURCH is Murray’s discussion of the relation between CHURCH and State. Murray limits the CHURCH in its influence in the political area to two means: the pulpit and the press.<sup>35</sup> Granted, as an institution the Church’s role in influencing political theory and practice is far more limited than the wider role of the community of faith, i.e. the body of Christ. It would be wrong for the Church as an institution to seek to do the work of the magis-

34. Murray, *op. cit.*, pp. 239-242.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 257.

trate. There is a biblical separation of powers here. Some members of the body of Christ, however, are called to be magistrates and they must exercise their vocation as Christians and as ambassadors of Christ. The magistrate also is to be subject to God's law and promote God's will and glory in his duty as a magistrate. He should also be a member of the Church institutional; but he does not exercise his office as a Christian magistrate on behalf of the institutional Church or in subjection to it, but as a Christian magistrate on behalf of Christ and in subjection to God's law. Those members of the body of Christ who are not magistrates will also exercise political influence via their votes at elections and via any other form of political action they may take. The body of Christ will thus be involved—or at least *should* be involved—as a group of responsible citizens in areas where the institutional Church may not go.

It may be that someone will claim I have misrepresented Murray and that he would, of course, accept my argument that Christians have a wider ministry or calling than that of the institutional Church, i.e. that they have a duty to think and act as Christians in obedience to God's word in all walks of life and thereby fulfil the cultural mandate. I quite accept the fact that Murray believed this.<sup>36</sup> But the point is that Murray has so defined the CHURCH that the logic of his words carries this reductionist implication. Whether he is being inconsistent at this point and would have agreed with the substance of my argument, if not with the form of my words, is irrelevant. Others will not, and will take his words to mean what they say, not what he may have meant by them. This definition of the CHURCH, the strict identification of the visible catholic CHURCH—the community of faith—as coterminous with the institutional Church has been the cause of much mischief for a long time. It is vital, therefore, that Christians no longer think in these narrow terms. The Church as an *institution* is limited in its field of operation, God-ordained and essential though that field is. The body of Christ, the CHURCH considered as the people of God, the community of faith, has a much wider brief however. Its calling is to

36. See for example, "The Christian World Order" and "Christian Education" in *ibid.*, pp. 356-374.

take dominion over the whole earth in the name of Christ, to possess his inheritance (Ps. 2:7-12; Rev. 11:15), which is the CHURCH's inheritance also by adoption into the household and family of God through union with Christ (Rom. 8:17).

Consider, for example, Ps. 149. The psalmist says unequivocally: "Let the saints be joyful in glory: let them sing aloud upon their beds. Let the high praises of God be in their mouth" (vv. 5-6a). Is this referring to the Church as an institution? If Murray's definition were correct, and the CHURCH may never be conceived of apart from the institution, i.e. the "organization of the people of God visibly expressed and in discharge of the ordinances instituted by Christ," what are we to make of the remaining verses of the Psalm, which refer to the same saints: "And a two-edged sword in their hand; To execute vengeance upon the heathen, and punishments upon the people; To bind their kings with chains, and their nobles with fetters of iron; To execute upon them the judgement written: this honour have *all* his saints. Praise ye the Lord" (vv. 6b-9). If the CHURCH may only be conceived of as an institution, as Murray claims, then the Church, according to this Psalm, must wield the sword of state. But this is incorrect, as Murray himself would have acknowledged. The *only* alternative is to acknowledge that the CHURCH may, indeed *must*, be conceived of apart from the institutional Church in many of the individual and social spheres in which it has been called by Christ to function as his body on earth. Otherwise the separation of powers is at an end. The problem, however, is resolved if the CHURCH is not defined exclusively in terms of the institutional Church. This Psalm compromises Murray's limitation of the CHURCH in the political field severely, and shows to be untenable his assertion that the CHURCH may only be conceived of as the institutional Church.

For Murray, as soon as the saints step outside the sphere of the institutional Church and its four functions they effectively cease to be the CHURCH. But the CHURCH is the body of Christ. Those who are united to Christ through faith are not members of his body merely when they are at Church or engaged in one of the four activities Murray defines as functions of the Church. They do not

cease to be members of Christ's body when they enter the political sphere, or the business world, or the world of the arts etc. Christianity is a whole life religion. There are no areas of neutrality. In every sphere of life we are either for Christ or against him. Christ demands that we live out our faith in every sphere of life because he is Lord of all things. This means that Christians must function as Christ's body in every area and sphere of life; that is to say, the CHURCH must function in every sphere of life. The CHURCH *is* the body of Christ. The only alternative is for the CHURCH to return to the cloister, to the sacred/secular divide that characterised mediaeval Roman Catholic theology and philosophy. The institutional Church, however, has a much more limited function. It is vitally important that the CHURCH should not be reduced to the institutional Church, therefore, if the body of Christ is to claim the world for Christ and bring all things into conformity with God's word.

It is clear that the definition of the word *church*, its precise meaning and terms of reference, has been the source of confusion among the best of theologians and has led to dire consequences with regard to the CHURCH's understanding of its divine calling in the fullest sense. Bearing in mind the distinction between the Church defined as an institution and the CHURCH considered in the broadest sense as the body of Christ (the biblical *definition*), I offer the following definition of the Church (the ecclesial institution), which attempts to avoid this confusion. There are two parts to this definition: (i) the Church is an organised assembly or covenant community of those professing faith in Christ together with their children. It is the body of Christ organised as a community of faith for specific purposes prescribed by God's word, viz the maintenance of the Christian public religious cultus. (ii) The Church is thus always a *local* institution. The definitive functions of the Church, as set forth in the Scriptures, do not allow the Church to be anything other than a local institution. The administration of the sacraments, pastoral care and public worship can only take place in a local situation, and it is the regular exercise of these functions, together with the teaching of God's word, in a specific locality among the covenant community that defines the institutional Church—i.e. constitutes the

Christian public religious cultus. The importance of these two principles will become clear as we look at the government of the Church as set forth in Scripture.

## THE GOVERNMENT OF THE CHURCH

It is clear from Scripture that the New Testament Church was governed by elderships, i.e. councils of elders (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:4, 6, 23; 16:4; 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17; Tit. 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1). This form of Church government was derived from the Jewish synagogue. Indeed, the Church is the Christian synagogue, and James refers to the Church as a synagogue when he says "For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring . . ." etc. (James 2:2). The Greek word translated "assembly" here is *sunagoge*, from which the word *synagogue* is derived. The Christian Church is thus based not on a Temple model, presided over by priests, but on a synagogue model ruled by elders. The New Testament Church derived its form of government from the pre-monarchical societal structure of Israel as a nation, not from the structure of the Old Testament religious cultus.<sup>37</sup> The Jewish synagogue in the first century was precisely the Jewish nation organised on the local level for social purposes and religious purposes other than those associated with the Temple cultus (but not for political purposes since it was an occupied nation).

There were, of course, and had to be, some basic differences between the Church and the synagogue. For example, the Church is not an *ethnic* community. Its elders, therefore, were not the heads of the great or influential families and clans of a particular community, as would probably have been the case in the Jewish synagogue. The Church is a community of faith that does not recognise national or ethnic (racial) boundaries as a criterion for membership,

37. This is an area where there are significant discontinuities between the Old and New Testaments due to the passing away of the Old Testament ceremonial cultus.



nor breeding and ancestry as a criterion for leadership. Its elders were therefore chosen by the congregation from among those members who were mature in the faith and of sound doctrine (Acts 14:23; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9).

There are, of course, serious disagreements between believers on this point of Church government. The principles of Church government set forth in this essay, however, can be applied, in the main, to Episcopal, Congregational and Presbyterian Churches. My primary concern is with Church governors, whether they are called elders and chosen by the congregation or priests and appointed by a bishop, or deacons or ministers etc. The important point is *how* they rule, how they govern the Church of Christ and *what* they teach. The issue of the *form* of government is secondary in my judgement to how government is practised. There are priorities in the Christian life and in the government of the Church. I believe that the *character* of Church government—whether it is a *godly* Church government—is more important than the *form* of Church government. My concern primarily is with the basic principles of Church government set forth in Scripture, which are practicable in Episcopal, Congregational and Presbyterian Churches where there is the willingness and commitment to make them work.

I shall consider Church government under four heads: (i) the nature, (ii) form, (iii) authority, and (iv) election of Church governments.

(i) *The nature of Church governments*

Elders (i.e. Church leaders, whatever they might be called) rule the Church, first, and primarily, by *teaching* God's word. Second, they govern by *pastoring* the flock. Pastoral activity (counselling, advice, personal encouragement, exhortation, rebuke where necessary and moral support) flows out of teaching, and therefore the two should not be separated. It has been common in Presbyterian Churches for a distinction to be made between ruling and teaching elders. This distinction has been taken too far, and it is at least doubtful whether the primary proof text supporting it (1 Tim. 5:17)

actually means what it is so often thought to mean.<sup>38</sup> All elders are to be teaching elders (1 Tim. 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:24; Tit. 1:9). Some may excel more in gifts of administration than others and may therefore devote more time to such things. Others may be particularly gifted in teaching and spend more time expounding the word. But all are to be teachers. Pastoral care cannot come from one who does not understand nor is able to teach the word of God to those in need of help. I have heard it said that such and such is not a good teacher but he is an excellent pastor. This is nonsense. What will happen when someone comes to such a pastor with a serious problem? Will he say "Oh, well! I am afraid I cannot to explain what the Bible says about this to you. So I suggest you do this"? Such is the logic of the silly idea that someone may be a good pastor but not a good teacher. The pastoral ministry should flow out of the teaching ministry. If it does not there is a problem and the answers given by such pastors to those who come to them with pastoral problems will most likely not be biblical answers. If an elder is not able to teach he cannot counsel his flock properly according to biblical principles. (In fact this is what is wrong with so many Churches. Their "pastors" and ministers are ignoramuses who know little of biblical doctrine and are unwilling to learn it so that they can teach and pastor their flocks properly—i.e. they are lazy as well as ignorant.) Teaching and pastoring go together (Eph. 4:11). They must not be separated too far. Although in a sense it is true that one can be a teacher without being a pastor it is not true that one can be a pastor without being able to teach. The ability to teach God's word is essential to pastoral care and the principal part of it.

Third, the government of the Church rules by determining matters of Church policy where necessary. Elders rule on matters

38. "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double pay, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). It is arguable that the contrast intended here by Paul is not between those who lead (which is what *προεστώτες* means) and those who teach, but between those who lead, which includes teaching, and those who *strive hard* (*κοπιῶντες* means *to tire oneself out*) at preaching and teaching, which is the primary aspect and major part of Church leadership. I am grateful to Colin Wright for bringing this point to my attention. See also the discussion at note 44 below.

that affect the life of the Church and cannot be left to the individual Christian's predilection or witness—e.g. the form of service or liturgy, the content and structure of the teaching programme, the CHURCH's witness to the world *as* an institution, for instance its stand on issues over which society seeks its advice or concerning which the Church must bear testimony (abortion for example). However, all such rule is to be strictly in accordance with the word of God. This function of government is not a catch-all for tyrannical elders and bishops to rule like monarchs or military juntas in a totalitarian fashion over the lives of the members of their congregations.

Fourth, the government of the Church is to rule by maintaining discipline when it breaks down in the areas of doctrine and morals. But the major part of government does not consist in disciplining the congregation. The disciplining of members is what happens (or should happen) when something goes wrong. We are not to see error as a major drain on the Church's activities. Rather, through the ministry of the word and pastoral guidance, error in doctrine and practice is to be avoided. Discipline, therefore, is the last option open for rooting out error. It is not the major part of the government of the Church. It is necessary on occasions, and the machinery must be in place and in working order, so to speak. But it should not characterise the Church's life nor the tenor of its government. If it does, something is going wrong with the teaching and pastoral ministry of the Church. This may, perhaps, be because of the way the gospel is presented. For example, by watering down the message of God's word in order to get the Church building full on Sundays the ministry may attract those who have no intention of living the Christian life according to God's word. They come to Church for entertainment, since this is what the Church has promised they will get if they come. Problems arising from such non-committed people should not go as far as having to be resolved at the disciplinary level. They should be dealt with at the teaching, pastoral and membership levels. Teaching, primarily, and pastoring, which involves both teaching and individual practical application of doctrine, and to a secondary extent policy making, are the main aspects of the ongoing government of the Church. This is entirely *positive* in char-

acter, whereas the exercise of Church discipline is a negative function of Church government.

Fifth, it needs to be stressed that elders, or Church leaders (whatever their title), do *not* rule the *lives* of the members of their congregations, they rule the *Church*, which has a limited, though fundamentally important, function in man's life. Their rule ends at the boundaries of the Church's God-ordained function and must always be in conformity with God's revealed word. No Church member is obligated by God's word to obey Church rulers except where these two conditions are fulfilled, that is to say, where their rule is within the God-ordained boundaries of Church life and in conformity with God's word.

Thus, the government of the Church, in the main, is to be characterised as a *ministerial* function. The government of the Church is not magisterial in nature, i.e. it does not execute God's judgement on the sinner, as the State executes God's judgement on the criminal in the temporal order, but rather declares God's word. This is so even in excommunication, since the Church's judgement is only bound in heaven if it is in accordance with God's word, and even then it is God, not the Church, who executes judgement in accordance with his own righteousness.

This is not to say that there is not a juridical element in the government of the Church, i.e. the need for courts to be convened when things go wrong to determine difficult matters of doctrine and practice, disputes between members and to discipline those who apostatise in doctrine or morals. The Bible specifically teaches that these matters, if they cannot be resolved on a personal level, are to be dealt with by the convening of Church courts and the rendering of judgement according to God's word (Mt. 18:15-17; 1 Cor. 6:1-4). But this only happens when things go wrong. It is not to be the norm. The Church is to aim higher than that. The Church leadership is to aim at governing the Church through teaching, preaching and pastoral care. Only where these fail to maintain discipline and order are courts to be convened. When order does break down courts are necessary and proper. But they are not to be the norm; they are rather a remedy for failure, to be applied when the normal

means of governing the Church through the teaching and pastoral side of its ministry is ineffective.

There is a juridical element to Church government, but it is not to be seen as a major method of ruling. It should not characterise Church government. If it does, this indicates that something is going wrong somewhere else in the government of the Church. The extensive use of Church discipline reveals a failure in the Church's primary ministry, not greater vitality. The nature of Church government is thus ministerial, not magisterial. This is important to remember. If the Church gets this the wrong way round, if elders see government of the Church primarily as magisterial, with ministry taking a subservient role, the Church will end up in excessive authoritarianism and ecclesiastical popery.

Such things are and have been common in the history of the Church. It has been a problem in Episcopalian Churches (prelacy), in Presbyterian Churches ("*New Presbyterian* is but *Old Priest writ Large*" said Milton), and among Independent Churches. It has also been a common problem among charismatic groups. It is true that by and large the problems of Church government faced by the majority of Free Churches today, at least in England (this may not be true in the USA), are not the problems of overbearing and tyrannical Church officers, but rather problems of the congregational variety, i.e. anarchy and the tyranny of the majority vote in Church meetings. But among many Churches and groups who generally do recognise the problems associated with democratic type Church governments there has been a swing to the opposite error of excessive authoritarianism.

This is a problem that Church leaders should be aware of and seek to avoid. Where the magisterial dominates over the ministerial in Church life there is the danger, even probability, of a pathological condition developing in which a few exercise tyrannical control over the congregation. This is a terrible *sin*. Christ condemned such tyranny in the CHURCH and specifically taught that leadership in his CHURCH is not to be characterised by such an attitude (Mt. 20:24-28). We must remember that Christ died to set his people free, not to bring them into a new kind of bondage under elders or bishops.

Freedom can only exist under God's law, not man's law, or even Church law (e.g. man-made canon law and the rulings of elders that have no basis in the Bible). Church government is ministerial not magisterial, i.e. it ministers *God's* word. When it ceases to do this it abdicates its true purpose under the gospel and therefore its authority is no longer binding.

This has been a problem in Churches that have focussed on and prioritised the authority of Church officers, the status of the clergy and their powers over the congregation. When the magisterial element begins to dominate over the ministerial to the point where it is suggested that the sermon or teaching side of the Church service should be minimal, a homily, so that people will not be divided by teaching in the Church service, and that the teaching should be done outside the Church service, the Church is in serious trouble. The result is a failure to equip the CHURCH for its task of service, since the principal means that the Holy Spirit uses to equip the CHURCH for service, the word of God, is de-emphasised in the life of the Church. The same thing happens in charismatic Churches when teaching is abandoned in favour of "worship" services that consist purely of shared emotional catharsis. Such Churches fail to equip the saints for their task of service in the world. The Church becomes a cult in which the faith revolves around a shared esoteric, existential experience that can only have meaning for the initiated and has no value or effect outside the group and meeting—i.e. it bears no fruit in terms of service, because it does not equip the participants for service but rather withdraws them from the arena in which this service is to be performed: the world. This is essentially inward looking. But what happens when teaching is relegated to an optional extra in the life of the Church? In such a situation the Church cannot be led through the ministry of the word because this is seen as divisive, which of course it is, and is meant to be so (Lk. 12:49-53). As a result the Church has to be led through a disciplinary regime, an ecclesiocracy in which the clergy start taking control over the lives of the members of the congregation instead of *teaching* them how to live in submission to *God's* word. This has been a problem in both charismatic and non-

charismatic Churches. The common factor in both types of Church is the de-emphasis of God's word and the emergence of a "spiritual" elite who seek to exercise an all-pervasive control over the congregation.

This is not the biblical model. Church ministers are to equip not control their congregations. It is *self-government* according to God's word that teachers and pastors are to inculcate in their congregations. The aim of the ministry is to lead the congregation through teaching and pastoral care into the maturity of faith that enables such self-government to flourish. Self-government is the foundation of all godly government, in State, family and Church. For example, it is Church members who must elect elders in the first place. Without the development of self-government according to God's law among the members of the congregation godly Church governments cannot be elected since the maturity and wisdom of the congregation will be determinative in choosing Church rulers.

Leadership of the Church primarily through the use of disciplinary measures is unbiblical. It inverts the correct order. The government of the Church should be ministerial, and primarily positive, through the teaching work of the ministry. *That* is where the elders are to *labour hard* and spend most of their time (Acts 6:2-4; 1 Tim. 5:17).<sup>39</sup> This is ministry not magistracy. If teaching and doctrine are considered secondary by the Church leadership those who are not believers will not be challenged over their unbelief and sin at the outset. They may join the Church for its social activities etc. But then, because they do not understand what the Christian faith requires of them and are not prepared to conform to God's law when informed of its demands upon them, lack of self-discipline and breakdown of order in the Church become problems that have to be dealt with by the disciplinary procedure. If the Church establishes a biblical teaching programme at the outset, however, such would have had to face their sin and repent, or else not join the Church in the first place, before such disciplinary problems develop.

39. See note 38 above.

The word of God is there precisely to do this sifting of the goats from the sheep. When it is denied this function, because it is watered down or relegated to an optional extra in order to fill up the Church building on Sunday mornings, the sifting has to be done by leaders using the disciplinary procedure. But this is to stand the biblical order on its head. It is often also an attempt by men to claim the power that belongs to God, which is exhibited through the preaching and teaching of the word.

(ii) *The form of Church governments*

We have seen above that the Church is always a local institution (see pp. 12 and 37). This necessarily means that in the institutional Church there is a great deal of decentralisation. This point is especially pertinent to Reconstructionist Churches since it is an area where many Reconstructionists have not applied important principles that they consider essential in other areas of societal life. For example, in Reconstructionist circles and literature much fuss is made, and rightly so in my judgement, about the illegitimacy of the top-down centralised bureaucratic power exercised by the modern State. Such centralisation and concentration of political and economic power in the hands of the State is abominated by Reconstructionists. Political and economic power and authority should be decentralised as much as possible; and this is a principle that is protected by the Eighth Commandment, which forbids the amassing of economic power (wealth) by the State through high levels of taxation.<sup>40</sup> However, when it comes to the Church, this principle seems to have been abandoned, and Churches that contravene this principle of decentralisation of power are popular. The result is that individuals and families are subjected to highly regimented control from above by Church authorities who seem to think that because they are appointed as ruling elders they have a right to lord it over their flock and rule on matters that Christ never put within their

40. The amassing of such wealth and power was also specifically forbidden to the kings of Israel (Dt. 17:14-17). See also Stephen C. Perks, "The Abolition of Private Property," in *Calvinism Today* (January, 1994), Vol. IV, No. 1, p. 2f.



jurisdiction. It seems to be thought by some that since the Bible does not give specific instructions about some things and leaves open a number of possibilities about the way Christians may act, elders can rule on these matters and bind their congregations rather than leaving Christ's people with the liberty that the Bible gives them. But this is a betrayal of the trust given to elders, who should rather be encouraging the development of self-government according to biblical principles among the flocks to which they are given as pastors. This is a serious problem in the Reconstruction movement, which will lead, and has in some instances already led, to grave excesses.<sup>41</sup> In Church as well as State authority should be decentralised as much as possible, both within denominations and within Churches themselves.<sup>42</sup>

41. See the following articles and debates dealing with this problem in *Calvinism Today and Christianity and Society*: Andrew Sandlin, "Reservations on Tyler Reconstruction," *Calvinism Today* (April, 1992), Vol. II, No. 2, pp. 22-26; "Correspondence," *Calvinism Today* (July, 1992), Vol. II, No. 3, pp. 2-5; "Correspondence Special," *Calvinism Today* (October, 1992), Vol. II, No. 4, pp. 5-8; Gary North, "Ecclesiology in One Lesson," *Christianity and Society* (January, 1995), Vol. V, No. 1, pp. 8-12; Stephen C. Perks, "Some Thoughts on Gary North's Juridical Ecclesiology" and Andrew Sandlin, "Another Lesson in Ecclesiology," *Christianity and Society* (April, 1995) Vol. V, No. 2, pp. 2-11; Stephen C. Perks, "The Westminster Assembly and Church Discipline," *ibid.*, pp. 12-15; Andrew Sandlin, "Recapturing the Vision of Christian Reconstruction" and "The Christian Libertarian Paradigm: Freedom under God's Law" in *Christianity and Society* (July, 1996), Vol. VI, No. 3, pp. 18-26.

42. An example of how things can go wrong within a local Church in this way is where schools associated with particular Churches come under the direct control of the eldership of the Church. I am not saying that things will necessarily go wrong in such a situation, but there are enough examples of their having done so to give us good reason to be cautious of such relationships. The education of children is the responsibility of *parents*, not their Church elders. Of course the ministry of the Church will, or at least should, give instruction from the Bible regarding the Scriptural principles involved in providing a Christian education for one's children. But this is a different matter from Church elders actually controlling the education of children as a ministry of the Church under their direct authority. I know of schools where this works well; but I know of other situations where it has been a disaster, largely because of the tyrannical attitudes of elders whose ambition in life seems to be to control the thoughts and lives of those under their care in the minutest detail. At the least I would say that the direct control of a school by the Church is a situation to be avoided if possible in normal circumstances, though I would not necessarily condemn it, especially in a missionary situation. (See Stephen C.

This principle of decentralisation of power does not mean, however, that each Church should be totally independent from other Churches, and that there should be no organisational or juridical connection between them. The notion that each Church is totally independent juridically from all other Churches is clearly not biblical. The truth, the biblical position, lies between these two extremes.

There clearly were synods of a kind in Scripture. The synod of Acts 15 met to determine certain issues of doctrine and practice. A number of points arising from this text need to be considered:

(a) The synod met at Jerusalem. This fact does not mean that the Jerusalem Church should be considered as the ultimate authority (the metropolitan see, so to speak) within the early CHURCH, nor that its elders were prelates (as with the Church of Rome), though it may indicate a certain priority of the Jerusalem Church as the *fons et origo* (humanly speaking) of the growing CHURCH dispersed throughout the Jewish and Graeco-Roman world. With the destruction of Jerusalem this priority ended—probably it ended before this effectively, or at the very least was severely compromised, as a result of the growing Gentile Churches established by Paul (as I shall argue below)—and there is no biblical evidence or reason to suppose the eldership of the Church of Rome, or of any other Church, to have superseded the eldership of the Church of Jerusalem with divine sanction. The *principle* of an appeal to a synod drawn from elders of local Churches remains valid, however, as an abiding principle of Church government.<sup>43</sup>

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Perks, *The Christian Philosophy of Education Explained* [Whitby: Avant Books, 1992], Chapter 7, "Some Observations on the Role of the Church in the Provision of Education," pp. 117-130).

43. The term *presbytery* means simply "a council of elders." All meetings of elders of the Churches, whether at local, provincial or national levels, therefore, are presbyteries, and it is at least possible that the term is used in Scripture of a council of elders drawn from a single local Church (1 Tim. 4:14). But since the term *presbytery* has historically been reserved (at least among Reformed Churches) for a provincial meeting of elders from a group of Churches all under the government of that eldership I shall not cause further confusion by applying it to the eldership of a single congregation, legitimate though this usage may be. I argue that authority in the Church should be synodical, i.e.

Although Jerusalem was the mother Church, to whose eldership appeal was made in Acts 15, it does not therefore necessarily follow that the elders of the Jerusalem Church would always carry the day and rule definitively, with the other Churches simply submitting to their rule as authoritative. Even granted a certain priority to the Jerusalem Church, therefore, it did not operate on the Roman (prelatical) model. An instance of how the twelve apostles themselves—the “pillars” of the Church (Gal. 2:9)—and the Jerusalem eldership had to submit to the Gentile Church is given by Paul, whose apostleship did not fit the criteria laid down by the apostles in Acts 1:21-22. When Paul went up to Jerusalem ostensibly in a gesture of submission to authority, it was in the event the apostles at Jerusalem, not Paul, who had to submit by revising their previous criteria for apostleship and accepting Paul and Barnabas into the fellowship of the apostles (Gal. 2:11-10). This revision of the criteria of apostleship constituted the overturning of a previous ruling by the apostles that was forced upon them by Paul’s calling and mission to the Gentiles.

This demonstrates that apostolic authority itself was not unbounded or without subjection to the wider authority structure of the Churches, united and represented in synod. Apostles did not rule as monarchs or prelates in their sees. They were themselves subject to authority; their rulings could be appealed to a synod and their practices, where they failed to find warrant in the word of God, could be rejected and rebuked—for example Paul’s rebuke of Peter for causing a schism at Antioch (Gal. 2:11-21).

The authority of the apostles and the eldership of the Church of Jerusalem was thus not prelatical but synodical; that is to say authority in the Church was exercised by elders jointly and not severally.<sup>44</sup> The apostles met with the elders of the Jerusalem Church and

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exercised by a synod of elders. The term *synodical* could be legitimately used interchangeably with *presbyterial* in this context, but I wish to avoid confusing my position with historic Presbyterianism and so I use the term *synodical* to characterise biblical Church government.

44. I argue in this essay that teaching is the principal means of ruling in the Church, that all elders should be teaching elders, that the distinction between

representatives from the Gentile Churches and came to determinations on the matters put to them in conference with those elders and representatives, even to the extent of being obliged to overturn their own prior practices and rulings when presented with compelling evidence and arguments from the delegates of other Churches.

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ruling and teaching elders predicated on 1 Tim. 5:17 is arguably a false distinction (see note 38 above), and that elders should rule jointly not severally. A clear implication of this is that the Church's teaching office should not be confined to one ordained minister, but that this office should be exercised jointly by an eldership each member of which is an ordained teacher; in fact ordination as an elder would automatically mean ordination as a teacher also, since teaching is the principal aspect of ruling. This is an entirely valid conclusion. It does not, however, invalidate the Church's employment of an individual elder in a full-time capacity, especially in Churches whose financial means are insufficient to employ more than a single full-time elder and whose small numbers do not require more than this. The point is that although he may be the only elder in full-time employment in the Church and therefore may be acting as a presiding or chief overseer and teacher, his is not the only teaching office. He is not the sole interpreter of God's word authoritatively in the Church, even if he is the principal person fulfilling this ministry. His interpretation of Scripture is subject to the teaching office of the eldership as a whole and the doctrine taught by the Church is thus not a matter of one man's personal opinion. The doctrine of each teacher (elder) is thus subject to the guidance of, and where necessary correction by, the teaching office of the eldership as a whole, each member of which is ordained as a teacher and interpreter of God's word. The teaching office of the Church is, therefore, exercised jointly not severally. This situation does not usually exist where the distinction between ruling and teaching elders prevails. The result is that, despite a theoretical commitment to Presbyterian principles, many Churches operate a system that is episcopal on the practical level, in that a single ordained minister effectively exercises personal rule with subordinates whose office as ruling or "lay" elders is nominal and whose real purpose is to function as assistants to the minister. This kind of de facto or practical prelacy is not Presbyterian, no matter how much ministers and Churches may boast of their Presbyterian commitments. Where a "Presbyterian" Church is independent (this is especially the case among small ultra-Reformed congregations) or belongs to a "denomination" with only two or three other Churches governed by like-minded ministers, i.e. virtually independent, the result is often just as unbiblical as prelacy—indeed it is a form of prelacy, since there is effectively no appeal beyond the local minister or a small clique of ministers (a sort of spiritual junta). Such Church governments are not biblical despite theoretical commitment to Presbyterian principles. Episcopalianism is more biblical since there is at least an authority structure in which the priest is not a self-appointed Protestant pope—i.e. the biblical principle that a man in authority should be a man under authority (Ex. 18:17-27; Dt. 1:9-17; Mt. 8:8-9) is acknowledged and practised. See further Appendix A, section 5.

Although the concrete circumstances of the first century situation no longer exist and cannot be recreated (nor would it be right to try and recreate them), nor the priority accorded the Jerusalem synod transferred to another Church synod (which would be a vain attempt to try and recreate the first century situation), the general principles of Church government described in the book of Acts and taught in the New Testament are still relevant and must be applied to the contemporary situation. There should exist, therefore, the possibility of an appeal by the eldership of one Church to a synod drawn from the elders of the wider community of Churches for guidance and ruling on matters appealed to it. If the rulings of the apostles themselves were subject to synodical authority and revision, *a fortiori* bishops, priests and ministers should be subject to the same kind of synodical authority. Even after the development of Episcopacy in the early post-apostolic Church bishops were subject to synodical authority, as can be seen clearly from the first four ecumenical councils.

(b) The Jerusalem synod was not a Church but a court or council of elders drawn from the Churches at Antioch and Jerusalem. It did not engage in the activities that define and constitute the function of a Church. Rather, it was an *ad hoc* council convened to determine matters specifically appealed to it by the Church at Antioch.

(c) Since the synod did not constitute a particular local Church it did not contravene the principle that the Church is always a *local* institution.

(d) The synod existed by virtue of an *appeal* from a particular Church. It had authority to determine the matters of doctrine and practice appealed to it, and its authority was applicable to the the Churches *because* it was a council drawn *from* the Churches. Its authority came from the Churches that called it into being. Authority was not imposed from above on the Churches, therefore, but granted to the synod by the Churches, and this is why the authority of the synod was expected to carry weight. It acted upon commission from a particular Church, which is the first object of the authority delegated by Christ to his Church. The synod's authority

was applicable to the Churches because its authority came from the the Churches. Power and authority thus flow upwards from the Churches to synods (decentralism), not downwards from synods to the Churches (prelacy—and as history teaches, it is possible for presbyteries as well as individual elders in Presbyterian Churches to act in a prelatical fashion; indeed, this has been one of the abiding failures of Presbyterianism throughout its history).

(e) The synod was not a *standing* council or committee. There was no ongoing presbytery but only *ad hoc* synods. Synod met as *need* determined. This was a reflection of the judicial system instituted in the Torah (Ex. 18:17-26; Dt. 1:9-17). Just as judicial cases were appealed up to higher courts when the matters with which they dealt were too difficult for the local judges to determine, so also in the Church, matters that could not be settled at the local level were appealed to a higher court. The important point is that these higher courts met as *need* determined. They came into existence as a result of an appeal from judges at the local level who could not determine justice without help. Ordinarily, these judges were to deal with matters at the local level (Ex. 18:22; Dt. 1:17). The Acts 15 synod follows this pattern and provides a paradigm for the Christian Church in all ages.

(f) Synod did not meet, therefore, to determine and regulate the ongoing normal life and teaching of the Churches. That was done by the apostles and prophets who laid the foundation of the CHURCH (Eph. 2:20) and the evangelists, teachers and pastors who built on that foundation (Eph. 4:11ff.). It met only to settle matters that could not be settled at the local level, i.e. matters that the Churches sought guidance on by appeal to a synod drawn from the Churches. This is to say that the synod did not constitute the ordinary government of the Church. It did not exist to govern the Church on a regular basis, but to address extraordinary matters of doctrine and practice that the ordinary government of the Church (the eldership) could not determine on its own.

(g) Although the synod at Jerusalem did not constitute a Church, but merely a council drawn from the Churches, it did act representatively, just as Parliament does not constitute the nation

but represents the nation and acts for the nation.

(h) It was the *servant* of the Churches, i.e. convened by a particular Church to help the Church. This fact does not invalidate or weaken its authority, however. The synod was called into being by a particular Church. Therefore the Church was to submit to its determinations on the matters appealed to it—see point (d) above—provided, of course, these determinations were according to the word of God.

(i) The fact that the synod's power was derived from the Churches that brought it into being does not imply that the synod's authority was not also from God. Likewise today, because this is a Scriptural model, the authority of such councils and synods must be seen as coming from God. But this authority does not come *directly* from God. All authority is mediated by God through his word. This means that authority is always circumscribed by God's word: the Bible. No human authority comes directly from God. Thus, no Church is under obligation to obey an apostate council or synod that is not itself subject to the word of God and does not operate within the Scripturally defined limits of its jurisdiction and authority, just as no member or family in the Church is bound to abide by the illegitimate dictates of the eldership of a particular Church. Even the synod is under the authority of God's word, and both synod itself and the Churches that call it into being must ensure that its deliberations conform to God's word.

The Acts 15 synod shows us two important principles that have to be held in tension therefore: first, the Church is always a local institution, and therefore authority is normally decentralised at the local level. Second, in abnormal situations, when the Church cannot rule on a difficult matter that is important to the ongoing life of the Church, it is to convene a synod, which is to determine the matters put to it by the Church.

This shows, further, that Churches are not totally independent from each other; they are connected, united to each other because they consist of members of the one body of Christ, which cannot be divided, and have a divinely sanctioned means of calling on each other for help and counsel. Moreover, the principle that the Church

is always a local institution connected to other Churches by synods and councils of representatives drawn from the Churches does not invalidate the notion of a *national* Church—i.e. a national association of Churches with a representative council and officers, ministers, and even overseers appointed for various purposes both at the regional and national levels, provided such officers are subject to the authority and sanction of synod—nor the Establishment Principle, though it may require the modification of that principle as it has been practised historically in Christian nations.

Christians need to come to terms with the decentralised, synodical nature of Church government. It is a principle that should be practised not only in the State but in the Church also. This brings us to the extent and limits of the authority and power given to those who govern the Church.

(iii) *The authority of Church governments*

The authority of the Church's *ministry*, its teaching and pastoral functions, extends to the doctrine of the whole word of God. The ministry has the mandate and authority to teach the whole counsel of God, to instruct and encourage, rebuke and admonish all men in all things addressed by the word of God.

The authority and power of the Church to *discipline* and *excommunicate* apostates who refuse to repent (the juridical function) extends to faith (basic Christian doctrine) and morals (i.e. behaviour that is clearly condemned as immoral in Scripture). The authority and power to excommunicate applies only to those issues that involve doctrinal or moral apostasy, i.e. where the doctrine held by the offender is a *denial* of the faith once delivered to the saints, or when his life is *immoral*, a denial of the faith practically, and he will not repent. Beyond this the Church is to show tolerance to those who do not come up in every detail to the standard of doctrine and behaviour taught or practised by the ministers or other Church members, which is very often a self-imposed (i.e. self-righteous) standard in any case. God's law, not the piety of the pastor and chief "spiritual" persons in the Church (or that of their wives) is the



standard of behaviour required by the Christian faith. Paul's teaching on this matter in Rom. 14 should be taught by the ministry and taken to heart and applied practically in the Church by all members.

This limitation on the power of the Church to discipline and excommunicate members was maintained by the Westminster Assembly in its Directory of Excommunication. Unfortunately, the modern publishers of the Westminster Assembly's deliberations have thought fit to excise from their editions the Directory for Church Government, Church Censures and Ordination of Ministers, which contains the Directory of Excommunication.<sup>45</sup> This Directory of Church Government was put together in order to provide a practical guide for Church government and attempted to accommodate both Independents and Erastians. The Directory of

45. The Directory of Excommunication forms part of the Directory for Church-Government, Church-Censures, and Ordination of Ministers. The latter is a separate document from The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government published in most editions of the Westminster Standards. The Directory of Church-Government was presented to Parliament on July 7th 1645. It was adopted by Parliament in an ordinance passed on August 29th 1648 and published under the title "The Form of Church Government to be used in the Church of England and Ireland." (William Beveridge, *A Short History of the Westminster Assembly* [Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, (1904) Revised and Edited by J. Ligon Duncan III 1993], p. 73) It was never formally approved by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (B. B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, (1931), 1991], p. 43). Warfield states that "In this document, which avoided as far as possible all questions of principle, very full and definite expositions were given of the actual framework of Presbyterian government." (*ibid.*) It was, however, a document aimed at accommodating, at least in some measure, all parties, Presbyterian, Independent and Erastian. Beveridge states that "This Directory seems to have had its origin in the desire to present the form of Church government in the most useful and practical way possible. It is evident that Henderson was especially concerned about this Directory, labouring to make it acceptable to Independents and Erastians. Neither appear to have liked it, and the Erastians insisted on an appeal from the national Assembly to Parliament." (*op. cit.*, p. 73) Accommodation to the Independents can clearly be seen in the concession that excommunication requires the consent of the congregation, and accommodation to the Erastians is evident in the last paragraph of the Directory of Excommunication, which requires the civil magistrate to enforce Church discipline. The Directory of Excommunication has been reprinted in Stephen C. Perks, "The Westminster Assembly and Church Discipline," in *Christianity and Society* (January, 1995), Vol. V, No. 1, pp. 12-15.

Excommunication requires the consent of the congregation for excommunication, a concession that clearly shows the influence of the Independents on the Assembly's work. This directory may seem too unPresbyterian for many modern Reformed Presbyterians, some of whom seem to consider arranging a disciplinary session with the presbytery for their fellow, but less-consistently Presbyterian, brethren the true sport of pietists. But its balanced emphasis, at least at *this* point, is a principle that history has proved Presbyterianism, with its never-ending schisms and divisions, could ill-afford to ignore. The Directory of Excommunication states quite baldly:

Such errors as subvert the faith, or any other errors which overthrow the power of godliness, if the party who holds them spread them, seeking to draw others after him; and such sins in practice, as cause the name and truth of God to be blasphemed, and cannot stand with the power of godliness; and such practices, as in their own nature manifestly subvert that order, unity and peace, which Christ hath established in his church: those being publicly known, to the just scandal of the church, the sentence of excommunication shall proceed according to the directory.

But those persons who hold other errors in judgement about points, wherein learned and godly men possibly may or do differ, and which subvert not the faith, nor are destructive of godliness; or that be guilty of such sins of infirmity, as are commonly found in the children of God; or, being otherwise sound in the faith, and holy in life (and so not falling under censure by the former rules) endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and do yet out of conscience not come up to the observation of all those rules, which are or shall be established by authority for regulating the outward worship of God and government of his church: We do not discern to be such against whom the sentence of excommunication for these causes should be denounced.<sup>46</sup>

Why is there this difference between the extent of the authority given to the didactic and juridical functions of the Church government? Because excommunication is a remedy for correcting an er-

46. *A Directory for Church-Government, Church-Censures, and Ordination of Ministers: Agreed upon by The Assembly of Divines at Westminster, with the assistance of Commissioners from the Church of Scotland, and Appointed by the General Assembly at Edinburgh 1647, to be printed, and Examined by the several Presbyteries against the next General Assembly* (Glasgow, 1763).

ror in the membership of the Church. Those who are to be excommunicated should not be in membership since they have denied the faith. One can disagree with the doctrine taught by the ministry on issues that do not involve a denial of the faith. Christians genuinely disagree on many matters that are not essential to salvation. Their place is thus within the Church not outside it. We are saved by grace through faith in Christ, not by doctrinal perfection or by perfect knowledge. Saving faith is *naïve*. We all come into the Church immature, needing to grow in knowledge and in our practice of the faith. Lack of knowledge, unless it constitutes a complete vacuum in adults, and misunderstanding, unless it involves a complete denial of the faith, does not mean that a person should not be a member of the Church. It means simply that he needs to be attentive to the ministry in order that he might grow. This is so for all believers, including ministers. Furthermore, Christ has bought our liberty with his blood. We are, as believers, free men under God in the Church just as much as in the State. Our lives should not be totally regulated by the Church any more than by the State. The Church authorities may not regulate and control the lives and consciences of Church members through the disciplinary procedure. Such tyranny is just as wicked as that exercised by the humanistic State. Rather, the Church authorities are to lead the congregation through the ministry of the word and pastoral activity. But if what one believes or does *denies* the faith, that is a different matter. He should not be part of the Church, because he is not a member of Christ's body, and known to be apostate. He should therefore be excommunicated if he refuses to repent.

Both the well-being of the Church and of the person under discipline is involved in excommunication. The Church's well-being is involved since false believers and apostates will exercise a baneful influence upon the Church, which may be led astray into immoral practices (1 Cor. 15:33; Rev. 2:12-23). The apostate's well-being is involved also, since as an apostate he will not enter the kingdom of God. Yet if he remains in the Church he will not be forced to confront this fact. He needs to be apprised of his true condition and encouraged to repent. But he needs also to be shown that in his

present state he is not accepted by God, has no part in the family or household of God, the community of faith, and will face eternal judgement unless he repents. If he is a backslidden Christian, he also needs to be warned of the danger. He needs to understand that he should repent, and that until he does he will have no part in the kingdom of God, and therefore no part in Christ's Church. If someone dies in such a state of unrepentant sin—i.e. in a state that warrants his excommunication—he should not be considered to have *ever* been a Christian, regardless of any profession of faith he may have made. The Bible teaches not only election and sovereign grace, but the doctrine of perseverance also (Mt. 10:22), and the backslidden Christian needs to understand this. Thus, excommunication has a pastoral and restorative emphasis as well as being a means of removing from the community of faith those who have no part in it.

But erroneous views and beliefs that are not a denial of the faith and wayward practices that are not subversive of godliness need to be dealt with by teaching and pastoral care, by nurturing the believer and helping him to grow in the faith, in knowledge and practice (the two should go together). An erring member of the Church who is resistant to this process might not be a true believer. But he cannot be disciplined or excommunicated until he demonstrates his apostasy by his beliefs or behaviour. Those who are true believers, however, belong in the community of the Church no matter how they misunderstand things not essential to their salvation. Those who are not of the faith and known to be such because of their denial of the faith in doctrine or practice do not belong in the Church and should be removed.

It is thus on the basis of essentials, fundamental doctrine, and on matters of immorality that excommunication is carried out, and then only when all other means have been tried and have failed. Whereas the Church's didactic function (teaching and preaching, the ministry of the word) extends to the whole word of God and all matters with which it deals, the Church's jurisdiction (its juridical function) is limited to fundamentals of doctrine and morality.

(iv) *The election of Church governments*

In the New Testament the rulers of the Church were chosen by the congregation from the male heads of households that were mature in the faith and sound in doctrine. In Acts 14:23 we read: "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting . . ." etc. (cf. Acts 6:2-6). The word translated "appointed" here is *cheirotoneo*, the aorist participle of the verb *cheirotoneo*, meaning *to vote for*, or *elect by a show of hands*. This verb was used in classical Greek of the stretching out of one's hand for the purpose of giving one's vote in the Athenian *ekklesia*, i.e. an assembly of all the citizens.<sup>47</sup> Those from whom the rulers of the Church were to be elected had to be qualified (1 Tim 3:1-7; Tit. 1:5-9). Among the qualifications for office listed by Paul is the stipulation that Church rulers (elders) must be mature in the faith, since the term *elder* means *an older one*, implying wisdom, knowledge, understanding and maturity. The important point for Church rulers, however, is maturity in the *faith*, not simply age, which does not automatically bring maturity of faith and sound doctrine. The requirement that elders must be able to manage their own household and family well shows that those from whom selection is to be made must have already proved their ability to govern before being appointed to the government of the Church. They must be married heads of households.

Once chosen, elders are to govern the Church. Their calling to the office of elder is perpetual ordinarily (Rom. 11:29). They should be respected and listened to because they are chosen by the congregation to an office that God has instituted in his word. Their authority is from God, mediated via his word—and thus their authority is always subject to God's word—and they are appointed by the congregation by means of election by the male heads of households. Their calling and appointment by the Church is, however, or at least should be, a recognition by the Church that they are called by God to be rulers in the Church. Their calling therefore as elders is from God *and* from the Church. When elders are elected and installed in office the congregation thereby recognises and calls those

47. Liddell and Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 1721.

whom God has already called and gifted. At least this is the way it should be.

Government of the Church is not to be by referendum. Members choose their elders, and once elected the elders rule. The congregation does not vote on every issue of Church government. It is for the elders as a council to rule, not the Church meeting. The Church is not a democracy, though it does have a representative government. Decisions in the Church over policy are not made by the congregation. There are two exceptions to this general rule where Church government is to be with the consent of the congregation: in the choice of elders and deacons (Acts 14:23; 6:2-6) and in the matter of excommunication (2 Cor. 2:6 cf. 1 Cor. 5:1-4). There is no warrant in Scripture for the anarchy that exists in many Congregational and Baptist Churches as a substitute for Church government. The congregation elects the elders; the elders then govern.

## THE FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH

THE *functions* of the Church are fivefold: (i) To *teach* and *preach* the word of God. (ii) To *administer the sacraments* of baptism and the Lord's Supper. (iii) To engage in *corporate public praise, worship*<sup>48</sup> and *prayer*. (iv) To *care for those in need* among the brethren, and also, where necessary and appropriate, to provide outreach by means of caring in various forms, which is connected with (i) under missionary work (preach the gospel and heal the sick, Lk. 9:2). This is the diaconal function of the Church. (v) To *maintain discipline* among the members of the Church in terms of faith (doctrine) and morals (practice) when they break down.

In Eph. 4:11-12 we read: "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." We are told here that Christ has given to his CHURCH certain ministries: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. These ministries are given for the *equipping* of the CHURCH (the saints) for the *work of service*, that the body of Christ (the CHURCH in the widest sense) might be built up. Clearly, these ministries do not exist for themselves or their incumbents, but for a specific purpose: to equip the saints for service. The function

48. The believer's duty to worship God is not exhausted by corporate public worship in Church, which is only one aspect of the worship that God requires of his people, not the whole of it. All that the covenant community or body of Christ does, both corporately and individually, is to be worship. This is necessarily a far broader view of worship than what happens in Church on Sundays and weekday meetings. The worship that God requires of mankind is not coterminous with the function of the institutional Church. See Stephen C. Perks, *The Christian Philosophy of Education Explained*, Appendix B, "Worship and Dominion," pp. 150-156.

of the CHURCH, the body of Christ in the wider sense, therefore, is the work of service, and these ministries exist to prepare and equip the saints for their calling as servants of God. *All* that the ministry of the Church does *as* the ministry of the Church—points (i) to (v) above—is to be geared to equipping the saints for this service.

It is important that we observe the order here: first comes the equipping of the saints for service, and then the building up of the CHURCH, the body of Christ, through that work of service. The building up of the CHURCH is the ultimate consequence of the ministry's work, but not the direct object of the ministry's work. It is not the primary task of the ministry of the Church to build up the CHURCH; nor is it the primary task of the ministry to build up the *institutional* Church, and to make it such leads to ecclesiastical empire building, which is very often detrimental to the primary task of the ministry, namely the equipping of the saints (the CHURCH) for service. It is through the work of service that the CHURCH, including the institutional Church, is built up. The building up of the CHURCH is not the purpose of the ministry, nor is it achieved directly through the work of the ministry. It is through the work of service engaged in by the whole congregation that the CHURCH is built up. The ministry's proper function is to make the work of service possible by training and equipping the saints for such service. The ministry equips the body of Christ for that work of service; it does not directly engage in it.

Here we can see why it is important to unravel the knot that theologians such as John Murray have tied the CHURCH into. The Church (i.e. the institutional Church), for example, may not engage in direct political action since there is a separation of powers between the State and the Church. Both are God-ordained institutions, but they are separate and may not be fused into one institution with power over both realms. But the Church, through its ministry, must equip the saints—i.e. the CHURCH in the widest sense as the body of Christ—for action and service in the political realm by teaching the biblical principles of civil government and civic responsibility set down in God's word. Life is inescapably political, just as it is inescapably aesthetic, philosophical, economic etc. Even



when men refuse to become directly involved in politics or do not vote at political elections their actions, or lack of action, have political consequences. Christians necessarily engage in political action whether or not they like it. And the Church must teach the saints how to think and act obediently in the political realm since in all that man does he is to serve God in obedience to his revealed word, and it is the Church's duty and function to proclaim and teach God's word.

It is the calling of the CHURCH, the saints, to engage in the work of service in the world, to bring the Christian gospel to bear upon every institution in society and upon all men in all walks of life. Through this work of service in the world by the saints the CHURCH is built up. This service is the witness of the saints to the redeeming grace of God in all walks of life and at all levels. It is the calling and function of the Church—i.e. the institutional Church—to equip the saints for this service. It is the calling of the CHURCH—the body of Christ—to engage in this service in the world. As it does so the CHURCH, including the institutional Church, will be built up. This is the correct order revealed in Scripture.

It is the failure of the Church to understand this order that has led to the irrelevance and impotence of the Church in modern society. The Church has become an end in itself and the ministry an end in itself. Its primary focus has been on building up the Church, on ecclesiastical empire building. By doing this it has ceased to do what it should be doing: equipping the saints for service in the world. Instead, the Church equips the saints only for (or rather manipulates them into) spending all their time and energy on Church related matters, Church meetings, prayer groups, midweek Bible studies etc. As a result very little time and energy is put into service in the world.

The result of this is that service, the very thing that the Church should be equipping and preparing the saints for, is abandoned, and instead the Church is prioritised. Since it is the work of service that builds up the CHURCH, not the work of the ministry, the CHURCH has not been built up. Instead it has declined.

D. M. Lloyd-Jones was a good example of someone who pro-

moted this erroneous interpretation of Eph. 4:11-12. He taught that the ministry was given to equip the saints, and to do the work of service, and to build up the CHURCH—i.e. that the ministry should do all three things.<sup>49</sup> The CHURCH in this interpretation is reduced to the function of the ordained ministry. We may ask, if this interpretation is correct: What precisely are the saints to be equipped *for*? No doubt, the answer would have to be “More midweek meetings, prayer meetings etc.” In other words the saints are not to *do* anything. God forbid! They are simply to sit in Church and pray about it—that is, ask God to get someone else to do something. Yet Lloyd-Jones should have known that neither the Greek nor sound hermeneutics would sustain this pietistic interpretation of the text.<sup>50</sup>

It is vitally important that we understand the function of the body of Christ, not only at the local level as an institutional Church, but in the widest sense as the people of God called to service in the world, i.e. to bring the whole world under the dominion of Jesus Christ by proclaiming and *applying* his word to the whole of life. The ministry of the Church is there to equip the people of God for this service, not simply to equip them to come to Church and sing more hymns, pray more prayers, listen to more sermons, good as these things may be. Such a view of the ministry is at odds with Scripture.

The function of the CHURCH, the body of Christ, is not to attend Church meetings, and spiritual maturity is not measured by how far someone has climbed up the greasy pole of the Church bureaucracy. The spiritual person who is truly living out the faith is not the one who does nothing but go to prayer meetings and preaching meetings, but the one who is engaged in the work of service, bringing the gospel to bear upon the whole of life, at work, at home, economically, politically, socially, as well as in Church. He is the one who goes to Church to get equipped for action in the world, and then goes into action in the world, bringing the word of God to bear upon all he does. The primary function of the body of Christ on earth, therefore, is *not* focused on the Church but on the king-

49. D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Christian Unity: An Exposition of Ephesians 4:1 to 16* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1980), p. 199f.

50. See Appendix B for a more detailed discussion of this text.

dom of God and thus on the *Christian life*, a life lived out in service to God according to his word. It is only with such a focus that the Christian works for or serves (i.e. worships) God in the totality of his life and being, thereby bringing the whole of life into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). It is through this whole-life service and the effect this has on man's culture that the kingdom of God is realised in history, not through *more* prayer meetings and mid-week Bible studies (valuable and worthwhile though these things may be).

"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" we are told in Mk. 16:15, not "Go into Church and hide from the world." Our purpose should not be primarily to get the world into the Church, but rather—and this is certainly the purpose of the ministry according to Paul in Eph. 4:12—to get the CHURCH into the world. Only then will the Church be built up. Invert the order and the result is a ghetto Church, impotent and irrelevant, which is precisely what we now have in Britain.

All five functions of the institutional Church mentioned above have as their purpose the equipping of the saints for this work of service in the world. If that work of service is neglected the CHURCH will not be built up because it is through that work of service that the CHURCH is built up. Instead it will be ineffectual. Unfortunately, in modern Western societies the Churches have become so introverted and self-absorbed that the world, the arena of the Christian's service, has been left, quite literally, to the Devil. And he has of course taken over, or at least is in the process of doing so. The Church must stop pursuing ecclesiastical empire building and seek to build the kingdom of God instead through equipping the saints for action.

What is that action, that work of service? It is what we mean by the term Christian Reconstruction. Christian Reconstruction is not an added extra, an option for those socially-minded or action-oriented Christians. It is the heart of the Christian's work of service and central to the Christian life of faith. We are here to work for God, to bring all things into obedience to his will. That is the work of Christian Reconstruction. It is not an extra, but rather the function of the body of Christ on earth, and without it, without that

work of service in the whole of our lives, the Church will be in ruins and the body of Christ ineffective and powerless to influence society, precisely because it has denied such influence as essential to its reason for being. Without Christian Reconstruction, therefore, the CHURCH will not be victorious.

Of course, we may have one or two mega-Churches here and there where all the "spiritual" people get together to pray for the end. But the CHURCH as a vibrant, dynamic force for good, and the Church as one of the three main pillars of society (Church, family and State) will be essentially lost. Mostly it will be, as it is today, under the heel of the humanist State, with one or two Protestant monasteries, little enclaves of spirituality retreating from the battle-front.

The Church will only be built up again through the work of service, through Christian Reconstruction. Building up good Reformed Churches will not lead to Christian Reconstruction. Rather Christian Reconstruction will lead to the building up of the Church. The idea has prevailed in some Churches that if only we could get the Church worship service right and the preaching thoroughly Reformed all will go well in society. Or, if only we got the liturgy correct all the rest will fall into place. This is to put the cart before the horse. The Bible teaches that it is the work of service by the body of Christ in the world that leads to the building up of the CHURCH. When the clergy reverse this order they take on a role and authority in the life of the believer that is beyond their scriptural mandate and jurisdiction, and the importance and authority of other institutions are accordingly diminished—e.g. the importance of the family and the authority of the family head, who, as a result of this erroneous view of the function of the Church, subjects himself and his family to ecclesiastical bondage.

The CHURCH gets sidetracked from its proper purpose when it concentrates on the status, authority and function of the clergy and the Church and the role of Church government. Ecclesiomania, not service according to God's word, i.e. working out the faith in all areas of life, becomes the predominant occupation of the believer, consuming all his free time and energy. I also believe that the end

result of this perspective, of reversing this order given us in the Bible, and of neglecting the proper function of the Church ministry and the work of the CHURCH as the body of Christ, is the sacred/secular divide, since everything that is not clergy- or ecclesio-centred is viewed as second class in the Christian's affections and life.

There are a number of important points to be considered with regard to the work of service, which is the primary function of the CHURCH, the body of Christ.

(i) It is to be *outward-oriented*. Its purpose is not primarily to get more people into Church. It does not have as an ulterior motive enlarging Church membership roles. Of course, this will be the result. But the spirit that sees service primarily in such terms is not the spirit of Christian service. The Christian faith is not centred primarily on the Church but on the kingdom of God and thus on the Christian life. And the kingdom of God is necessarily wider than the Church. The animating spirit of Christian service is outward: to go into all the world and preach the gospel, by word and deed. The building of the kingdom of God on earth is the primary focus of Christian service. The Christian desires firstly that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

(ii) It must be *positive* in its orientation and *life affirming*. I once heard a very "pious" Christian lady state that "death is the most natural thing in the world. I'm looking forward to it." I don't know quite what this is but it certainly is not Christianity. Christianity is about *life*, and having life *more abundantly*. There is far too much talk of this kind among Christians. It is morbid and it does not affirm Christianity. Christianity is about life and strength and victory over sin and over the world (1 Jn 5:4). It is about victory over death not escape into death. Death came in through sin, and Christ came to deliver us from sin. Death is a curse, not the most natural thing in the world. Death is the most unnatural thing in the world. It is the negation of God's purpose for man. God created *life*, and saw that it was good, not death. Sin brought death, and Christ died to deliver us from sin.

Furthermore, too many ministries both in the Church and outside the Church, in terms of evangelism etc. are negative. They

generate an attitude of fleeing from the world rather than the desire to conquer the world for Christ. We must flee from sin, and from the Devil, and from the world in the sense that the world stands for these things. But we must not flee from the world in the sense of the earth and society. Why? Because Christ died to redeem it, and it is his inheritance (Ps. 2:7-12). We are also told in Scripture that "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord; But the earth he has given to the sons of men" (Ps. 115:16). This world is Christ's inheritance, and as Christians we are co-heirs with him. The meek, we are told by Christ himself, will inherit what? Heaven? No. The *earth* (Mt. 5:5). From the way some Christians talk it seems they expect to inherit "heaven." They will be sorely disappointed. It's all going to be down here in the nitty-gritty of physical life. So you had better get used to it down here where for mankind life is lived. The earth, perfected of course, will be our home for eternity in the resurrection. Man can no more escape the physical nature of life than he can become divine. When physical life departs from man he is *dead*. As Christians we look to the *resurrection* from the dead, not a disembodied existence, which the Bible calls death.

We must seek to be positive and affect our culture for good, claim it for Christ and transform it by his word into "heaven on earth"—i.e. into a culture in which God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. We should not simply criticise humanism but start providing alternatives to its culture of death. A Christian culture should be a culture of *life* in the fullest sense.

(iii) It must be *comprehensive*. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Christ (Mt. 28:18). He is Lord of all and his word is to rule over all. There is no part of the created order that falls outside of his authority, jurisdiction and power. There is, therefore, no aspect of created reality that is not in his plan for the restoration of all things. God has given Jesus Christ to the CHURCH (the body of Christ) as head over all things, and put all things in subjection under his feet (Eph. 1:22). His reign is total. The CHURCH's task, therefore, as Christ's body on earth, is also total. As Christians we are to claim the whole earth for Christ because it is his inheritance, and ours also as a result of adoption into the family

of God through union with Christ. We are joint-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17). To put it simply—and biblically—the earth belongs to the Christians. It belongs to us because we belong to Christ, and the earth belongs to him. We are co-heirs with Christ, adopted children of God.

Christians must claim their inheritance. This doctrine of inheritance in Scripture is very important, both in material terms—inheritance from one generation to another—and in eschatological terms. Yet it has not been given sufficient attention in the preaching and teaching of the Church. The Christian's inheritance is usually seen, if it is considered at all, as some kind of nebulous ethereal place where the believer goes when he dies ("heaven," the "Christian" version of the pagan concept of the Elysian Fields). Not so! The believer's inheritance is the earth. It is the kingdoms of *this* world that are to become the kingdoms of God and over which Christ will rule forever (Rev. 11:15).

The earth is our inheritance, and Christ will return when he, through his body on earth, has fully come into the possession of it in history, not before. The CHURCH's calling in the world, therefore, must embrace every sphere of life and society. And it must embrace the whole of man's culture.

(iv) The work of service must be thoroughly *biblical* in orientation and practice. This may seem obvious, but in light of much that is being done by Christians today in the name of Christianity it needs to be re-asserted. There are two problems that the CHURCH faces here, and it is important that the Churches should understand these problems and deal with them appropriately and effectively. First, many do not believe that the Bible addresses all the issues that face the individual and society today. They do not have biblical answers to the problems these issues throw up. They do not even know there are biblical answers because the clergy, who are largely ignorant of these things themselves, do not teach the whole counsel of God. Most Christians, therefore, adopt by default the humanist answers they hear on the media and read about in the newspapers.

We must reject this ignorance and rebuke it. We must seek always to understand the Bible and the principles it gives us for

thinking about and living life obediently. This is difficult and laborious sometimes. Again, we must say that this is where the clergy, the professional ministers, fail so often, even in Reformed Churches. They do not do their job properly. They do not train and equip the body of Christ properly, comprehensively, and the work of service thus goes off half-cocked if at all. This is because the clergy cannot be bothered so often to do their own homework. They are lazy shepherds. We need to be rigorously biblical in our approach to the work of service. This means that the ministry must be willing and able, as a result of study and searching of the Scriptures,—that is to say as a result of ministers *labouring hard* at the work to which they have been called (1 Tim. 5:17)—to equip the saints with biblical answers to the problems that face the individual, CHURCH and society. Only then will the CHURCH be light and salt to the nation.

Secondly, however, for many the problem is much worse than mere ignorance. There are too many in the Church, including—indeed especially—many clergymen, who know that the Bible does address the issues that face the individual and society today. But despite their claims to be Christians, Reformed men etc. they refuse to accept the biblical teaching as valid or relevant. Like the Pharisees of the first century, they set aside the word of God for the traditions of men,<sup>51</sup> humanist traditions, the very traditions and practices that have brought the nation to its present state of ruin in the first place. Such must be confronted with their sin and called to repentance. The answer to these people is not gentle talk and understanding because they are not merely misguided Christians and it is time to stop treating them as if they were. They are wolves in clerical garb (Mt. 7:15). They are enemies of the gospel, and we need to wake up to that fact. The call to repentance is the only way to deal with such people, ministers included. And that means the call to *obedience* to God's word, including God's law. There are no legitimate excuses for antinomianism, in thought or deed, whatever sly theological rationale is used to justify it. The only remedy, therefore, is repentance.

51. See for example the discussion in Appendix A, sections 4 and 5.



The work of service must be thoroughly biblical if it is to be acceptable to God and in conformity with the works that he has prepared for us from the beginning (Eph. 2:10).

To sum up: the work of service must be outward-oriented, positive, comprehensive and thoroughly biblical.

## CONCLUSION

THE primary emphasis of the New Testament is on the kingdom of God, not the institutional Church. Indeed, the gospels hardly speak directly and specifically of the institutional Church at all and with the exception of Mt. 18:15-20 Jesus in his ministry on earth did not give detailed teaching on this aspect of the Christian life, leaving it instead to the apostles to work out later; and even the apostles, at least in Scripture, did not go into any great detail, giving only general principles, and thus much freedom, for the Church to build upon.<sup>52</sup> In contrast to the heavy emphasis on the institutional Church that is common today among Christians Jesus' emphasis was on the kingdom of God, on the CHURCH visible in the broadest sense, and on the CHURCH invisible, for example in the parables and the extended teaching given in the gospel of John chapters 14 to 17, especially the discourse on the promise of the Holy Spirit (14:16ff.), the true vine (15:1-11) and the high priestly prayer (chapter 17) in which he makes it clear that his intercession is only for God's elect, i.e. the invisible catholic CHURCH, since Judas Iscariot was still a member of the CHURCH visible at that point. The *institutional* Church simply was not the focus of Jesus' teaching during his earthly ministry, nor is it the primary focus of the Bible generally.

Of course, some would argue that in the parables of the king-

52. Of the 112 occurrences of ἐκκλησία in the New Testament the vast majority refer to a particular assembly or local congregation of believers (the visible institutional Church), and most of these are narrative, descriptive and vocative uses of the term that have little bearing on the development of a detailed ecclesiology. The term only occurs three times in the gospels, all in Matthew (once in 16:18 and twice in 18:17) and is totally absent from ten books of the New Testament: Mark, Luke, John, 2 Timothy, Titus, 1 and 2 Peter, 1 and 2 John, and Jude.

dom Jesus speaks of the visible institutional Church.<sup>53</sup> But these are not parables about the Church. They are parables about the kingdom of God, and they cannot be consistently interpreted as parables about the Church. For example, in the Parable of the Tares and Wheat the field represents the *world*, not the Church. It is not at all clear, therefore, that the parable is to be applied to the concept of the visible institutional Church. To assume that the mixed society of believers and non-believers, represented by the field of tares and wheat, is the visible institutional Church is to equate the Church with the world.<sup>54</sup> But even granted, for the sake of argument, that Jesus does here speak of the CHURCH visible, his teaching must refer to the CHURCH visible in a much wider sense than merely the institutional Church, since his subject is the kingdom of God and this has a much wider reference than the Christian public religious cultus. The institutional Church is only one aspect of the life of the CHURCH visible, not the whole of it. The role of the Church as an institution is ancillary to what was the primary focus of Jesus' teaching: the kingdom of God in the widest sense. His emphasis was on the kingdom and thus on the life of faith and obedience to God's word, by which the kingdom of God is manifested in history. The Bible teaches that man's life is meant to be Christ-centred in all things, not Church-centred. Jesus Christ, God's word made flesh, is our *logos*, that which gives meaning, purpose and outward form to the life of man,<sup>55</sup> both individually (personally) and in all his relation-

53. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), Vol. 1, p. 10. Bannerman defines the CHURCH visible thus: "This is the visible Church of Christ, known to men by the outward profession of faith in Him, and by the practice of those Church ordinances and observations which He has appointed for His worshippers" (*ibid.*, p. 9).

54. This is precisely what Bannerman does when he says: "And was this introduction of the tares into the visible *Church* inconsistent with its character as a Church . . ." (*ibid.*, p. 10, my italics). But of course the tares and the wheat are sown in the *world*, represented by the field, says Jesus, not in the Church. Is Bannerman equating the Church with the world? That is what he does, but not intentionally. It is just sloppy exegesis.

55. The Greek word *λογος* means "(A) the word or outward form by which the inward thought is expressed; and (B) the inward thought itself;—so that *λογος* comprehends both *ratio* and *oratio*" (Liddell and Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 901a). H. Kleinknecht has an interesting comment on the development of the *λογος* concept in the

ships with the outside world (society). Christ must be at the centre of life. It is idolatry to make anything or anyone else, including the Church, one's *logos*. Christ alone is to reign in man's heart.<sup>56</sup>

But I have argued in this paper that the institutional Church, that aspect of the CHURCH's life and calling whose function is the maintenance and practice of the Christian public religious cultus, has come to dominate the life and actions of the body of Christ, and this has produced a doctrine of the CHURCH that is distorted and clergy-centred. As a consequence the wider concern of bringing in the kingdom of God across the whole spectrum of man's personal, cultural and societal life has been neglected. Yet the Lord Christ commanded us to pray and work for this wider concern of the kingdom: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" (Mt. 6:10). This emphasis was Christ's emphasis. Significantly, in the prayer Christ taught his disciples to pray there is no emphasis at all on the institutional Church—it is not even mentioned. The Lord's Prayer is a kingdom- and God-centred prayer, not a Church-centred prayer, because that is the focus that is to characterise the Christian life. "Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness" (Mt. 6:33) Christ said, not "Seek first the institutional Church and its forms of public worship." The kingdom of

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Greek world: "It is presupposed as self-evident by the Greeks that there is in things, in the world and its course, a primary *λογος*, an intelligible and recognisable law, which then makes possible knowledge and understanding of the human *λογος*. But this *λογος* is not taken to be something which is merely grasped theoretically. It claims a man. *It determines his true life and conduct.* The *λογος* is thus the norm . . . For the Greeks, knowledge is always recognition of a law. Therewith it is also fulfilment of this law" ("The Logos in the Greek and Hellenistic World" in "λεγω, λογος, ρημα, λαλεω" in Kittel, *op. cit.*, Vol. IV, p. 81; my italics). For the Greeks perception of reality was purely intellectual, and the *λογος* was the principle around which this intellectual activity revolved. The *λογος* was the ultimate explanatory principle, that which gave everything its meaning, coherence and significance. For the Christian, therefore, Christ, as the *λογος* of God, determines man's true life and conduct, since the *λογος* of God gives true meaning, coherence and significance to the whole creation, of which man is the pinnacle.

56. I am using the term *heart* here in its biblical sense to mean the centre or essence of man's personality, his soul. Thus, for Christ to reign in man's heart means that he must reign in man's outward acts, words, and relationships also, "For as [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Pr. 23:7).

God cannot be reduced to the institutional Church. It is much broader and all encompassing.

There can be no uncertainty about either the connection or difference between these two fundamental notions: *The basileia* [kingdom] is the great divine work of salvation in its fulfillment and consummation in Christ; the *ekklesia* is the people elected and called by God and sharing in the bliss of the *basileia*. Logically the *basileia* ranks first, and not the *ekklesia*. It represents the all-embracing perspective, it denotes the consummation of all history, brings both grace and judgement, has cosmic dimensions, fills time and eternity . . . So there is no question of *basileia* and *ekklesia* as being identical . . . In every respect the church is surrounded and impelled by the revelation, the progress, the future of the kingdom of God without, however, itself being the *basileia*, and without ever being identified with it.<sup>57</sup>

Instead of seeking first the kingdom of God, however, the Church, at least in this century, has spent most of its time contemplating its own navel. Concerned only with the institutional Church, its outward form of liturgy, government, discipline, ministry etc. the witness of the CHURCH in the world has been woefully lacking, and it has been weakened in its divine calling to bring all nations to Christ, a commission that is all-embracing of personal, cultural and national life. The CHURCH has emasculated itself before the watching world and now the Churches wonder why they are so fruitless, so unable to speak with authority and power to the world they have abandoned.

The situation created by this clergy-centred view of the CHURCH, the Christian *ekklesia* or community of God's people, has not been helped by four centuries of misleading translation and by confused thinking about the body of Christ and its divine mission on earth, which might at least have been mitigated had those who translated the 1611 version of the Bible not imposed an essentially mediaeval doctrine of the CHURCH onto their translation. But they did, and this perhaps helps to explain why the CHURCH today is institution- and

57. Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, trans H. de Jongste (Philadelphia, 1962), p. 354ff. Cited in Andrew Sandlin, "Recapturing the Vision of Christian Reconstruction" in *Christianity and Society*, Vol. VI, No. 3 (July 1996), p. 23.

clergy-centred rather than kingdom-centred. It is not the whole explanation though. This institution- and clergy-centred view of the faith also explains why such a misleading translation of *ekklesia* has persisted. The mediaeval view of the CHURCH as an institution has both helped to create the error that led to the mistranslation and was in turn further ingrained in public sentiment by that translation. It is too late now to deal with this mistranslation. It is not too late to deal with the error it has helped to perpetrate.

It has been the purpose of this essay to attempt to correct this error. It has dealt with the nature, government and function of the institutional Church. It has been argued that the true nature of the CHURCH, the *ekklesia* of God's people, consists in its being the body of Christ—that it consists, to use the word of John Murray, of those “sanctified in Christ Jesus, regenerate by his spirit, and united in the faith and confession of Christ Jesus as Lord and Saviour.”<sup>58</sup> It has been argued further, however, that although this is the biblical definition, it does not account for all the biblical material bearing on the nature of the CHURCH in its outward or visible manifestation in the world, since the criteria given us by Christ for accepting a person into the fellowship of the CHURCH is not regeneration but profession of faith and works. We have seen, therefore, that the distinction between the CHURCH visible and invisible is necessary in order to maintain a doctrine of the CHURCH that is faithful to the whole of biblical teaching on the subject. We have also seen that the CHURCH in a particular geographical area should form itself into an institutional Church in order to maintain and practise the Christian public religious cultus instituted by God's word. It has also been argued, however, that while this institutional Church is a God-ordained societal structure with important functions in the life of the individual, the body of believers as a community, and the nation, the biblical doctrine of the CHURCH shows us that the *ekklesia*, the CHURCH in its broadest sense, is much more than the institutional Church. The former may never be reduced to the latter, therefore, without distorting the biblical emphasis. To adopt such a re-

58. See above note 29 for the reference. See also the qualification in the text immediately following the quotation.

ductionist doctrine of the CHURCH would be to collapse the whole of the Christian's life and calling in all its varied spheres of activity into one dimension of the Christian faith. Furthermore, logically it would be to confuse the relationship between the institutional Church and other institutions such as the State, and we might add, the family, each of which is a distinct God-ordained institution with specific and limited functions under God's law.

For example, the institutional Church may not exercise the authority of the magistrate, yet the Bible maintains that the CHURCH in the broader sense as the body of Christ, the community of believers, does have such a duty and privilege (Ps. 149:6-9); that is to say, the wider body of Christ has a political function within the legitimate jurisdiction of the magistrate, whereas the purpose and function of the institutional Church is limited by God's word to the Christian public religious cultus. Equally, the family is a Christian institution, which the CHURCH, i.e. the body of Christ in the broader sense, is responsible to maintain and govern according to God's word. But the institutional Church may not assume the authority and functions of the family without going beyond its legitimate calling and authority under God's word. Thus, the whole of society in all its varied spheres of activity is to be Christian; but this does not imply an ecclesiastical State, i.e. a State run by the institutional Church. Society is to be Christ-centred, i.e. centred on the kingdom of God over which Christ rules as sovereign, not Church-centred. But while the institutional Church is limited in its function and authority and may not encroach on the legitimate spheres of other God-ordained institutions (State and family), the CHURCH—the body of Christ in the broader sense—is to encompass all social institutions.

The government of the institutional Church has also been considered. I have attempted to deal with this issue without sectarian overtones while arguing, nevertheless, that the Bible in its doctrine and narrative examples sets forth the basic principle that government of the Church should be synodical not prelatical, i.e. that it should consist of elders acting jointly not severally. I have argued also, however, that Church government should be characterised as a ministerial function not a magisterial function, while at the same

time acknowledging a juridical element to the life of the Church in the disciplining of apostates and unrepentant immoral persons. I have, nevertheless, criticised the divisive, sectarian and tyrannical use of the Church's disciplinary function as unbiblical. The principal means of ruling the Church is through the teaching of God's word (Acts 6:2-4).

The New Testament *form* of Church government I have acknowledged to be elderships. But I have also stressed that there is a need for a balance to be maintained between hierarchy and decentralism and that the Bible does not give us a model of Church government in which power and authority flow down from the top echelons of the hierarchy to the individual Churches, but in which power and authority flow from Christ as the head and sovereign of his CHURCH to the local congregations and then upwards through the councils of elders elected by the congregations and the synods convened by local congregations to resolve extraordinary or difficult matters that cannot be settled at the Church level. In this way the biblical elements of both hierarchy and decentralism are maintained while the unbiblical idolatry of these elements of Church life evident in many denominations are recognised as deleterious to the life of the Church and avoided. Nevertheless, my concern has not been to promote a particular denomination, since none are free from error and without need of reformation and correction according to Scripture: *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*—"the church having been reformed is always fit to be reformed." I have argued, furthermore, that the character of Church government is more important than the specific form of Church government, and the principles of Church government that I have tried to outline can, in the main, be adopted by all Christian denominations.<sup>59</sup>

59. I know of one congregation in the Church of England that substantially put these principles into practice at the local level. Although on the level of the local Church this is unusual in the Church of England, on the regional and national levels the Church of England now officially operates on a synodical model of Church government not a prelatical model, and the bishops no longer rule as monarchs in their sees as they once did. The recent major decisions affecting the whole life of the Church, including the decision to ordain women to the priesthood, have been made not by the bishops but by



In view of this, the question arises as to whether the accommodation of all Protestant parties in a single national Church (if not a national denomination) cannot be formulated and embraced as an ideal to which the Christian CHURCH should work. This would not be the same animal as the ecumenical Church proposed by modern liberalism, but a Protestant ecumenicity based on biblical principles of Church government, rather than the highly rarefied and tenuous ecclesiologies maintained by most denominations. The fact is that most Christian Churches are *functionally* episcopal, at least at the local level, including most Presbyterian and Congregational Churches (and at the regional and national levels also to some extent—e.g. the superintendents of the Baptist Union in Britain), and most accept, in theory, the synodical nature of Church government on the regional and national levels, or at least the need for such synods on occasions (e.g. the national and deanery synods of the Church of England, and the regional and national associations of Congregational and Baptist Churches). A loose confederacy, at least, is surely practicable among Churches that are doctrinally in substantial agreement. What is necessary to achieve this is the commitment and willingness to work towards a more biblical view of Church government and a more biblical emphasis in the practice of Church government. Experience suggests that the lack of such a commitment today is generated either by idolatry of denominational ideologies or the lust for power by established Church leaders and dignitaries who fear the perceived loss of kudos and esteem that

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synod, a council consisting of bishops, clergy and laity. Deanery synods also operate on the regional level. On the local level individual Churches have a good deal of independence. Authority is largely decentralised in practice (compared with Presbyterian Churches in which authority is often decentralised in theory but not in practice) and the bishops, whether or not they approve what is done at the local level, are only able to exert their authority over the local Church in cases where morality has broken down—though, given the Church of England's lax attitude to morals this is unlikely to result in any form of disciplinary procedure anyway—or where the relationship between the incumbent and his congregation has totally broken down. In short, modern Church of England *practice*, in some important respects, more nearly conforms to the biblical model of Church government than does high Presbyterianism (I am referring here to the *practice* of Church government, not doctrinal orthodoxy).

the collapse of their own little ecclesial empires would bring.<sup>60</sup>

Finally, the function of the Church has been considered. Here we saw that the function of the Church is fivefold: (i) to teach the word of God, (ii) to administer the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, (iii) to engage in corporate public worship and prayer, (iv) to care for those in need (the diaconal function), and (v) to maintain discipline in terms of doctrine and morals. All these functions, however, have as their primary purpose the equipping of the saints, the body of Christ, for their wider service in the world, i.e. the cultural mandate and Great Commission—in the broadest sense what I have called Christian Reconstruction. The purpose of the Christian ministry, the teaching and pastoral office in the institutional Church, therefore, is to equip the CHURCH in the broader sense for action in the world according to God's word. The ministry of the Church does not exist for itself nor to build up the CHURCH directly. Rather, it must equip the CHURCH, the saints, for service in the world, and it is that service engaged in by the whole body of Christ in all areas and walks of life that builds up the CHURCH, including the institutional Church. The building up of the CHURCH is thus the remote consequence not the direct object or focus of the work of the Christian ministry.

We have seen that the CHURCH's service in the world, its calling as Christ's body on earth, proclaiming and working to establish his kingdom, is to be outward-oriented, positive, comprehensive (involving all spheres of life and culture both personally and nationally), and thoroughly biblical in orientation and practice. Yet we have also seen that this biblical function of the CHURCH has been distorted and overturned by a clergy-centred, inward-looking perspective that puts the institutional Church at the centre of the Christian life instead of the kingdom of God. The calling and function of the body of Christ on earth has thus been neglected. And since it is that service in the world that builds up the CHURCH, not the activities of the Church ministry directly, the Church as an institution has declined also. Thus has begun a vicious circle in

60. See also the discussion at note 92.

which the remedy proposed by misguided clergymen to revive the Church—i.e. more concentration on the institutional Church to the exclusion of the wider calling of the body of Christ in the world—has actually led to further decline, since it has set aside the calling and function of the CHURCH in the world, which is God's chosen instrument for accomplishing that end so eagerly desired by clergymen, viz the building up of the Church. The long-term result for the CHURCH, including the institutional Church, has been a CHURCH that is almost totally detached from life in the real world, and thus irrelevant and culturally impotent. The CHURCH has ceased to function as God's mouthpiece to a fallen world; and it fails to demonstrate the power of the gospel to a world in desperate need of the transformation that only the gospel can effect. But the irony of the situation has been lost on short-sighted clergymen who care only for building their (ever decreasing in size) denominational empires.

"The kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power" (1 Cor. 4:20), i.e. in the practical demonstration of obedience to God's word in the communities and individual lives of God's people. In the words of the popular proverb, "Don't tell me, show me." Yet how can a CHURCH that concentrates all its time and efforts on an institutional Church that is largely of the world but not in the world demonstrate the power of the kingdom of God in all its fulness to the watching world. The CHURCH would have to be in the world and seen as the CHURCH by the world for that to happen. Instead the CHURCH has retreated from the world. But Christ did not spend all his time and efforts in the synagogue. The retreating CHURCH has hardly had an example to follow in Jesus. He went into the world, and he commanded us to do likewise: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15). The task of teaching in the institutional Church is a function of the ordained ministry. It is not the central activity or focus of the CHURCH's calling, and neither is any other activity that may take place in Church. The calling of the body of Christ on earth does not revolve around the institutional Church. The calling of the body of Christ is to go into all the world and preach the gospel, in word and deed, to the whole creation.

When this vicious circle is broken and the saints are equipped for service in the world as Christ's body on earth, we can expect a Christian renaissance in society. The growth of the institutional Church will be the inevitable result, since God has promised to bless a people and a nation that is obedient to his word. Instead of this we have had the reduction of the CHURCH to the function of the ordained ministry. The consequence has been the decline of the institutional Church, but also, and inevitably, the repaganisation of the whole culture, in education, science, politics, economics, music, art, medicine, family, morality, charity, and all other spheres, since the reduction of the CHURCH to the function of the ordained ministry has necessarily meant the withdrawal of the influence of the Christian faith from these spheres of social and cultural endeavour. Another inevitable consequence of this situation has been the re-emergence of the sacred/secular divide. Along with this, ecclesiastical empire building has emerged as the goal of Church evangelisation programmes, with all the rancour that such stupidity generates. This is all the inevitable consequence of idolatry of the institutional Church.

In Church life as in personal life, the words of Christ are ever pertinent: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it" (Mt. 16:25). The institutional Church has lost its soul. Nothing could be more evident than that fact today. But what is not readily understood is that it has lost its soul because it has sought only itself and its own aggrandisement, its own power and importance in the life of the believer and the Christian community and indeed the world, instead of seeking what Christ taught us to seek before all others things: the kingdom of God. It has sought primarily its own increase and in so doing has failed Christ by failing to fulfil its vitally important, but limited, role of equipping the saints for service and dominion in the world. God has not blessed this idolatry. Instead he has judged the Church for its apostasy and idolatry, since "judgement must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?" (1 Pet. 4:17).

The only way for the Church, the institutional Church, to find

its soul again, and its proper function in the kingdom of God, is to lose itself for Christ's sake, i.e. stop seeking itself and seek instead to fulfil its God-ordained, but limited, calling in all humility. Instead of institutional empire building the kingdom of God must be the focus of the Church's ministry and the all-consuming passion of its members. It must begin its biblical function of training and equipping the saints for the task of building the kingdom of God in all spheres of life. The institutional Church is not the kingdom of God, it is merely one element of the kingdom, though a vitally important one, namely, the training and equipping arm of the kingdom. It is there to prepare and fully equip the CHURCH for its task in the world. It exists to get the CHURCH into the world, not the world into the Church. When it begins once more to fulfil this specific task to which it is called and for which it is provided with the various ministries, the CHURCH—i.e. the CHURCH in the broadest sense, the body of Christ—will be ready and able to start taking dominion over the earth in Christ's name once more, and the institutional Church itself will begin again to grow as the kingdom of God is realised in the lives and relationships of men and nations as they bow the knee to Christ as Lord and Saviour. The Church can then expect God's blessing, pressed down, shaken together and running over. Until then it will be boredom, irrelevance and stupidity in the Church "mummy factory"<sup>61</sup> as usual. May God give us all grace to lose our lives for his sake and seek the kingdom of God before all other things, for without God we can do nothing (Jn 15:5).

61. "Mummy factory" was a term used by General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, to ridicule the inactive and irrelevant Churches of his day.

## Appendix A

### SOME PROBLEMS WITH PRESBYTERIAN ECCLESIOLOGY

ALTHOUGH it is clear that councils of elders were the New Testament form of Church government, this should by no means be taken as implying that Presbyterianism, which claims to embody this form of Church government, has faithfully represented and accurately practised the biblical principles of Church government in all the particulars of its denominational system. Nor does it mean that other denominations not espousing Presbyterian ideology have failed completely to represent and practise the biblical principles of Church government. The reality is more complex than this. It is evident that Independency and Congregationalism are too atomistic. Complete independency between Churches is not a biblical ideal. Nevertheless, Presbyterianism on the whole tends to be too centralised and bureaucratic and gives to presbyteries and synods a degree of power and authority that cannot be justified biblically. I have argued in this essay that the biblical model incorporates elements of both these positions, but not in the extreme forms in which they are usually encountered in the ecclesial dogmas of either of these denominations. (I also maintain that in *practice* these extreme forms break down and that most non-Episcopal Churches revert to a functional episcopacy at the local level, and sometimes even at the regional level.)

There are in addition to this, however, a number of problems relating to Presbyterian ideology and practice that represent serious failures to understand, and as a result constitute departures from, the biblical doctrine of the CHURCH. Furthermore, in their denominational polemics Presbyterians have often sought to advance the

Presbyterian cause by means of appropriating to themselves alone, as distinctives of the Presbyterian way, doctrines that are held by all major Protestant denominations. This inevitably involves the misrepresentation of those who do not hold to Presbyterian ideology. Such polemics and the misrepresentation that accompanies them are a practical denial of the doctrine of catholicity. The following is not meant to be an exhaustive or systematic critique of Presbyterianism. It is rather a series of long notes to points brought up in this essay.<sup>62</sup>

1. It is not unknown among Presbyterians for the Church to be defined in terms of elders. For such there is no Church unless there is a plurality of elders and the visible catholic CHURCH is defined exclusively in terms of the institutional Church. In terms of the primary definition of the CHURCH given in the New Testament—the body of Christ—this position is untenable. But such a definition also fails to find validation in Scripture as a description of the institutional Church, as James Bannerman, a Presbyterian himself, has argued: “Even in the case of two or three professing Christians, met together for prayer and worship, whether publicly or in private houses, the term *ἐκκλησία* is applied to them in the New Testament; and that, too, before such a congregation might be organized, by having regular office-bearers and minister appointed over them. In the Acts of the Apostles we are told that Paul and Barnabas ‘ordained them elders in every Church’ as they journeyed through Lystra and Iconium and Antioch,—language which plainly recognises the congregation of professing believers as a Church, even previously to the ordination of office-bearers among them. The body of believers in any particular place associating together for worship, whether numerous or not, have the true character of a Church of Christ.”<sup>63</sup> This statement is in accord with the definition of the visible catholic CHURCH given by the Savoy Declaration of Faith: “The whole body of men throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel and obedience unto God by Christ according to it, not destroying their own profession by any errors everting the

62. See also note 68 below and Appendix C.

63. James Bannerman, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 11f.

foundation, or unholiness of conversation, are, and may be called the visible catholic church of Christ; although as such it is not entrusted with the administration of any ordinances, or have any officers to rule or govern in, or over the whole body."<sup>64</sup>

2. It has also been claimed by Presbyterians that the term *ἐκκλησία* in Scripture may stand for the eldership. There are no proof texts to support this notion, though it is not uncommon to see texts pressed into the service of this idea by means of specious argument. For example, James Bannerman, who argues for this identification of the eldership with the *ἐκκλησία* as one of several meanings of the term, gives only Mt. 18:17 as a proof text.<sup>65</sup> But this is begging the question since it would have to be shown first from the context or from other Scriptures that this is what the term *ἐκκλησία* means. Neither biblical nor lexical evidence will support this notion and Bannerman is reduced to arguing that "in the expression 'the Church,' which He [i.e. Christ] made use of, the Jews who heard Him *must* have understood the authorized rulers, as distinct from the ruled, to be the parties who were to determine in such controversies."<sup>66</sup> It should not need to be stated that what the Jews understood is hardly to be considered definitive in the Christian Church—they understood very little. But in any case, it should not be assumed that what *Bannerman* thought the Jews understood by the term *ἐκκλησία* is in fact what they did understand by the term. His identification of the synagogue court with the *ἐκκλησία*—i.e. the identification of the *ἐκκλησία* with the *γερούσια*—has support neither in Scripture nor in the literature of the period. Moreover, it is philologically impossible. Both the secular and religious uses of *ἐκκλησία* show that the term means an assembly of the *people*, i.e. an assembly of the *δημος* (the citizens of a State) or of the congregation (the people of God), *not* an assembly of officers or court of elders. Indeed, it is the *ἐκκλησία* of the people that elects the officers of a Church or city State (e.g. in Athens it was the *ἐκκλησία* that elected the officers not appointed by lot). The Greek *ἐκκλησία* was an assembly of the full citizenry of the *πολις* (city or

64. The Savoy Declaration, XXVI.2.

65. Bannerman, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

66. *Ibid.*, italics in original.



State). Its use to describe a council of elders is without precedent and far-fetched. Bannerman's argument is a classic example of eisegesis, i.e. the reading into the text of one's own assumptions, which then become the axis around which one's interpretation of the text revolves.

3. It should also be observed that the above citation from the Savoy Declaration (the Independents' version of the Westminster Confession) gives the lie to Bannerman's assertion that Independents "repudiate altogether the idea of a visible Church, sustaining a real, although external, relation to Christ, and composed of His professing people."<sup>67</sup> It is incumbent upon all Christians to represent their opponents accurately in debate. One would have thought that Bannerman would at least have had the moral integrity and intellectual honesty to read the most important of the Independents' confessions before he so calumniously misrepresented them. Perhaps Bannerman had no intention of trying to convince Independents of what in his opinion was the correctness of the Presbyterian form of Church government and contented himself with slapping his fellow Presbyterians on the back. But this was not the first apologetic for Presbyterianism in which a doctrine that is held by all major Protestant denominations was claimed as a distinctive of the Presbyterian way, and it certainly was not the last. It is unfortunate that Bannerman should have perpetrated such false witness against other believers in the first few pages of his book. Such arguments are not likely to be found convincing by Independents and bring the scholarship of those who espouse them into serious disrepute. Some may conclude that if Bannerman is a false witness in such an obvious matter he is not to be trusted elsewhere. After all, it is not as though the Independents' views on this matter were unknown and their beliefs difficult to ascertain. Such a judgement would doubtless be less than justifiable, but not altogether inequitable. Such misrepresentation (let us call it what it is: a *lie*) is not uncommon in Presbyterian polemics against those who disagree with Presbyterian ecclesiology. For example, James H. Thornwell perpetrates a simi-

67. *Ibid.*, p. 17

lar calumny: "The second theory is that of the Independents, who virtually deny a Catholic Church . . ."68

4. A related problem in many Presbyterian Churches is the sectarianism and idolising of Presbyterian tradition. For example, I have heard it said by a teaching elder in one Presbyterian denomination that prides itself on its adherence to the Westminster Confession of Faith that as a member of this Church one may not teach a doctrine that is contrary to the Westminster Confession even if it is *biblical* because the Confession is the constitution of the Church, not the Bible. This is not only idolatry but, ironically, unconfessional also. The Puritans who framed the Westminster Confession never intended it to be used in this way and specifically included a section disclaiming such infallibility for its deliberations: "All synods or councils since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made

68. *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, [1875] 1986), Vol. IV,—"Ecclesiastical," p. 39. Bannerman also claims that the Independents deny the lawfulness of confessions of faith (*op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 299), a misrepresentation that is patently contrary to known fact, as the existence of the Savoy Declaration clearly demonstrates. Indeed, in the Preface to the Savoy Declaration John Owen states: "In drawing up this our confession of faith, we have had before us the articles of religion (the Westminster Confession of Faith), approved and passed by both Houses of Parliament, after advice had with an Assembly of Divines called together by them for that purpose. To which confession, for the substance of it, we fully assent, as do our brethren in New England [Congregationalists—SCP], and the churches also of Scotland, as each in their general synods have testified." Other major Christian doctrines that have been claimed as distinctives of the Presbyterian way include the headship of Christ over the Church and the inerrancy of Scripture. In fact, I have in my possession a booklet in which the author claims *all* the major doctrines of the Christian faith as *distinctives* of the Presbyterian way. Says the author: "The purpose [of this booklet—SCP] was to explain major distinctives which historically have singled out Presbyterians from other denominations" (John Otis, *Distinctives of Biblical Presbyterianism* [1984], p. 45). These major distinctives, which the author claims single out Presbyterianism from other denominations, include the doctrines of the Trinity, the creation, the deity of Christ, the humanity of Christ, the atonement, the resurrection from the dead, predestination, the five points of Calvinism and more. What the author seems to be saying, at least this is the inevitable implication,—whether or not he fully realises this is not clear—is that only Presbyterians are Christians. He did miss one of the more important distinctives of Presbyterianism from his list however: tunnel vision.

the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as an help in both.”<sup>69</sup> The Westminster Confession was never meant by its framers to be a test of the faith, but rather a testimony, a help, to the faith. To use it as a test of the faith is idolatry and flies flat in the face of the testimony of the Confession itself. Scripture, not the Westminster Confession, is the irreducible dogma, a point that the Confession of Faith makes abundantly clear: “The supreme judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the scripture.”<sup>70</sup>

5. Furthermore, despite the fact that much is made of strict subscription, in some Presbyterian Churches what functions as the standard of orthodoxy is not the Westminster Confession of Faith itself, but rather a particular interpretation of the Confession, which may in places be quite anachronistic. In the case of small ultra-Reformed presbyteries whose strictness (sectarianism) has led them to virtual independency this may be the interpretation of one man or a small group of men whose inability to tolerate any deviation from their own opinions, institutionalised as the correct interpretation of the Confession, has created a kind of functional episcopacy. Presbytery, despite much braggadocio about Presbyterian principles, then becomes merely a rubber stamp for a new kind of Protestant prelate.<sup>71</sup> The Presbyterian principle of a council of elders drawn from the wider fellowship of Churches to determine issues of doctrine and morals is negated by such small presbyteries. The convening of a presbytery under such circumstances is a mere façade since a true meetings of minds is made impossible by the sectarian attitude and practices of the dominant personality or group. Any dissent from this prevailing opinion may result in disciplinary action, and thus the presbytery shrinks in size yet again.<sup>72</sup> The end result begins to resemble a cult in which the idiosyncrasies

69. Westminster Confession of Faith, XXXI.iv.

70. *Ibid.*, I.x.

71. See further the discussion at note 44.

72. It was far different for the leaders of the Church at Jerusalem when they met with Paul and Barnabas to consider the message they were preaching to

of one particular person or cultural sub-group are idolised and Scripture becomes a subordinate standard to the Confession, or rather a subordinate standard to a particular interpretation of the Confession. Even where these problems do not arise it is arguable that such small sectarian presbyteries contravene the principle of a multitude of counsellors on which Presbyterianism is supposedly founded and, thereby, make a mockery of the doctrine of catholicity, which is emptied of all meaning and content. Presbyteries of such small numbers do not constitute viable or legitimate presbyteries even in terms of Presbyterian ideology and doctrine.

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the Gentile Churches and their qualifications for apostleship. Until this point only those who had been with Jesus from the beginning were admitted into the fellowship of apostles. Neither Paul nor Barnabas could conform to this criterion and the previous ruling of the apostles (Acts 1:21-22) clearly shows that at the meeting referred to by Paul in Gal. 2:1-10 there was a genuine difference of opinion that was resolved by the overturning of the apostolic ruling cited in Acts 1:21-22 and the acceptance of new criteria for apostleship presented by Paul and Barnabas. Small ultra-Reformed presbyteries cannot usually swallow any disagreement with the Westminster Confession of Faith, a document that does not even claim apostolic authority or any kind of infallibility. We may wonder how they would have dealt with Paul and Barnabas. If the current practice of such Churches were to have been followed the alternative for Paul and Barnabas would have been to conform to the dominant view or be disciplined. The example given us by the Scriptures, however, is that this is not how presbytery is to function. Rather, it is to function as a *council*, a synod for debating and dealing with the issues, not as an inquisition for enforcing uniformity, which, alas!, is what it often deteriorates into. The Bible gives us a better example to follow.

## Appendix B

### D. M. LLOYD-JONES ON EPHESIANS 4:11-12

THE Authorised Version translates Eph. 4:12 in the following way: "For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ." Besides being a generally inadequate rendering of the Greek this reading translates two different Greek terms by the same English word. There are three occurrences of the particle "for" in the English of the Authorised Version, but in the Greek the first of these particles is *προς* while the remaining two are *εις*. The Greek thus reads "For (*προς*) the equipping of the saints for (*εις*) the work of service for (*εις*) the building up of the body of Christ." These three clauses are thus not co-ordinate. The second and third are dependent on the first. This interpretation is corroborated by the Greek: "The phrase *εις εργον διακονιας* is most naturally taken as dependent on *καταρτισμων*. The change of prepositions (*προς . . . εις*) points in this direction, but is not in itself conclusive: the absence of the definite articles however, with the consequent compactness of the phrase, is strongly confirmatory of this view. The meaning accordingly is: 'for the complete equipment of the saints for the work of service'.<sup>73</sup> Paul is not listing the three functions of the Church's ministerial offices therefore. What he says is that the ministry of the Church offices is there for the equipping of the saints, who are to engage in the work of service and thereby build up the body of Christ. This is the most natural and straightforward reading of the text. But Lloyd-Jones has the ministry, i.e. the Church officers, doing all three: ". . . the Apostle's idea in the entire context is that of the ministerial offices in the Church. To that end

73. J. Armitage Robinson, D.D., *St Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd, [1903] 1922), p. 182b.

he has been specifying them—‘apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers’. He is not thinking of the ordinary, average members of the Church; he is deliberately illustrating his theme by picking out certain offices and certain special callings. . . This is the entire context; and he includes those, and only those, who hold ministerial offices.”<sup>74</sup>

There are five problems with this interpretation of the text: first, the context, despite Lloyd-Jones’ protestations to the contrary, establishes the entire body of Christ as the subject of Paul’s teaching, not merely Church officers. Paul speaks of the “one body” (v. 4) and of the “One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and *in you all*” (v. 6). “Unto *every* one [i.e. each one] of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ” he says (v. 7). Likewise, in v. 16 Paul speaks of “the whole body” not merely the ministers. This is the context of Paul’s teaching on the purpose of the ministry and the work of service. He is clearly dealing not only with Church offices but with the whole body, the CHURCH in the widest sense. The focus of the whole passage from v. 1 to v. 16 is on the whole body of Christ. Yet Lloyd-Jones asserts that the ministerial offices constitute the “entire context” and that “he includes those, and only those, who hold ministerial offices.” This is a preposterous interpretation and constitutes a serious exegetical blunder; it demonstrates, further, a faulty hermeneutics and seriously inadequate theology of the CHURCH. A much sounder exposition is given by J. Armitage Robinson: “The second of these clauses must be taken as dependent on the first, and not (as in the Authorised Version) as coordinate with it. The equipment of the members of the Body for their function of service to the whole is the end for which Christ has given these gifts to His Church. If the life and growth of the Body is to be secured, every member of it, and not only those who are technically called ‘ministers’, must be taught to serve. More eminent service indeed is rendered by those members to whom the Apostle has explicitly referred; but their service is specially designed to promote the service in due measure of the rest:

74. Lloyd-Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

for, as he tells us elsewhere, 'those members of the body which seem to be feebler are necessary'. Thus 'the work of service' here spoken of corresponds to the 'grace given to every one of us', which is the subject of this section.<sup>75</sup> Likewise, F. F. Bruce writes: "These various forms of ministry were given to the people of God to equip them for the diversity of service which they were to render in the community, so that the community as a whole—the body of Christ—would be built up. The three prepositional phrases in this verse are not coordinate one with another, as might be suggested by the RSV rendering ('for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ'); the second and third phrases are dependent on the first, as is indicated by their being introduced by a different preposition from the first."<sup>76</sup>

Second, if Lloyd-Jones' interpretation were correct, we must ask, What is it that the saints are to be trained or equipped for? There is no simple answer to this question given Lloyd-Jones' position. In fact, however, Lloyd-Jones concedes the point in principle when he admits that "there is a sense in which it is true" that "our Lord has set all these offices in the Church in order that we all may be rendered fit or 'furnished out for' the doing of our service, whatever that service may be,"<sup>77</sup> but he refuses to acknowledge that such service is taught in this particular text because, he says, "the whole context is against it,"<sup>78</sup> an assertion that has already been easily refuted. In other words, if the above question were put to him Lloyd-Jones would only have answered that the saints must engage in the work of service, a position he was at pains to deny in his exposition of the text. His position is hopelessly self-contradictory.

Third, if it were indeed true that the whole of this work of service is the responsibility of the Church officers or ministry, we should expect the three clauses to be connected by the conjunction *καί* ("and") before the preposition *εἰς* in the second and third clauses, and there is no conjunction thus connecting the latter

75. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 98f.

76. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1984), p. 349.

77. Lloyd-Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 199f.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

clauses. Fourth, Lloyd-Jones' interpretation reduces the CHURCH to the function of the ordained ministry. And if the ordained ministry is to do the whole of this work of service and building up of the CHURCH what need is there for the grace given to each member of the body of Christ to enable him to work out his calling? Indeed, if it were the case that the ministry is to do the whole work of service this fact would negate the ordained ministry's function as the training arm of the CHURCH, since there would be nothing to equip or train the saints for and thus no purpose for that function of the ministry, unless of course this equipping of the saints refers totally to training people to sit in Church, listen to sermons and pray—i.e. unless the whole of the Christian life is to be reduced simply to Church services, which is patently unbiblical. The argument thus negates itself. Furthermore, on such an interpretation the calling of each one referred to in v. 1 would have to refer only to ministers, an idea that is clearly against the whole context.

Fifth, Lloyd-Jones' interpretation of the text involves the reading of a technical meaning into the Greek word *διακονια* (meaning *service* but usually translated *ministry*). *Διακονια* is "the office and work of a *διακονος*,"<sup>79</sup> *διακονος* being a *servant*. But if any technical meaning at all can be read into the term it must surely be that of *deacon* (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Tim 3:8ff.), an office that is precisely not the office of the teacher, and thus a meaning that would plainly contradict Acts 6 vv. 2 and 4. Yet it is the office and work of the teacher that is understood to be indicated by the use of *διακονια* in Eph. 4:12 by those who treat it as a technical term. This simply shows, however, that such technical meanings should not be read into the term automatically, and that close attention must be paid to the context in order to determine the correct meaning of the word. It is this careless reading of a technical meaning into the term that has led to the modern idea that the New Testament sanctions the ordination of women deacons, since the word *διακονος* is used to describe Phoebe in Rom 16:1. But *διακονος* is used for a great variety of services in the New Testament including a waiter at tables (Jn 2:5)

<sup>79</sup> G. Abbott Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, Third Edition, 1986), p. 107.



and the civil magistrate (Rom. 13:4) as well as a teacher in the Church (Acts 6:4). It will surely not be argued that the civil magistrate is commissioned to preach the gospel and teach the word of God. The feminist exegesis of Rom. 16:1 demonstrates pertinently the danger of reading technical meanings into the term *διακονος* and its cognates without conclusive evidence from the context. The result, as with Lloyd-Jones' interpretation of Eph. 4:12, is a distortion of biblical doctrine. All the saints are the servants of Christ and therefore the term *διακονια* has reference to the service rendered by each member of the body of Christ. Each member of the CHURCH has to fulfil the *διακονια* (service) to which he is called in Christ. *Διακονια* is not used in the New Testament in a uniform technical sense, and it is not legitimate to read such a technical sense into the word without sufficient evidence from the context. It has been argued above that neither the immediate context of Eph. 4:11-12 nor the overall context of the passage provides such evidence, grammatically, linguistically, logically or in any other sense, for reading a technical meaning into the term.

Lloyd-Jones is by no means alone in his interpretation of the text however. Commenting on Eph. 4:11-12 A. T. Lincoln states: "It is . . . hard to avoid the suspicion that opting for the other view [i.e. the view put forward in this essay—SCP] is too often motivated by a zeal to avoid clericalism and to support a 'democratic' model of the Church."<sup>80</sup> It will hardly be objected that this essay supports a democratic model of the Church. Nevertheless, it is hard to avoid the suspicion that the interpretation adopted by Lincoln and Lloyd-Jones is motivated by a zeal for clericalism and an autocratic model of the Church. Strangely, Lincoln says: "there are, in fact, no grammatical or linguistic grounds for making a specific link between the first and second phrase."<sup>81</sup> There are two problems with this statement in the context of Lincoln's comments on the text: first, he has just referenced a work in which grammatical grounds *are* put forward for the interpretation he rejects on the basis that there is no grammatical justification for it. He does not mention or attempt to

80. A. T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1990), p. 253.

81. *Ibid.* By this he means not treating the phrases as co-ordinate.

deal with this grammatical argument. In view of this it is hard to avoid the suspicion that Lincoln has not read the books he cites in his bibliography. Second, his argument begs the question since he offers no grammatical or linguistic grounds for his own interpretation, i.e. for not making a specific link between the first and second clauses. In fact, he merely asserts there is no such link, and he is reduced to bare assertion rather than argument quite simply because there are no grammatical grounds for his own interpretation—the parable of the man with a beam in his eye offering to remove the speck of dust from his brother’s eye seems apt. Yet, as with Lloyd-Jones, he virtually concedes the argument when he says “An active role for all believers is *safeguarded* by vv 7, 16 . . .”<sup>82</sup> Why safeguarded? It is hard to avoid the suspicion that Lincoln realises that the interpretation he puts forward will lead to a distorted view of the role of the CHURCH, as indeed it has done. His clerical interpretation thus needs to be safeguarded. He continues, “but the primary context here in v. 12 is the function and role of Christ’s specific gifts, the ministers, not that of all the saints.”<sup>83</sup> Again this is begging the question. There is no reason to make this assumption. The grammar does not compel us to this conclusion. In fact it supports the alternative argument (see below). The context does not compel us to it. In fact, unlike Lloyd-Jones, Lincoln concedes that the wider context is the whole body. There are no grammatical or contextual reasons to shift the focus of the passage like this. Again, we must ask the question, What are the saints to be equipped for by the ministry? The answer, which, as with Lloyd-Jones, Lincoln himself provides by his reference to the active role of the whole body safeguarded by vv. 7 and 16, is *service*. But if that is so evidently true, and both Lincoln and Lloyd-Jones concede the point, why do they and so many other clergymen then make such efforts to deny it in this specific context of v. 12? It is hard to avoid the suspicion that it is because the most natural interpretation of the text, both in terms of context and grammar, would sound the death-knell of the clergy-centred view of the CHURCH that so many clergymen and theolo-

82. *Ibid.*, my italics.      83. *Ibid.*

gians are so dependent upon for their livings. It seems that progress in understanding the true import of Paul's words in this text is held up simply by vested interest. Why, money might start being transferred to worthwhile projects that involve people engaging in Christian reconstruction and true mission work in the world instead of going to support idle ministers, liberal theologians and their decadent colleges!

Furthermore, although the change of prepositions on its own is not conclusive, that is not the whole matter (see the citation from Robinson above). But even if it were, the change in preposition certainly does not support Lincoln's and Lloyd-Jones' interpretation. Lincoln has to argue his point of view *in spite of* the change of prepositions. The change of prepositions, although not conclusive in itself, is certainly corroborative of the interpretation put forward in this essay. On no understanding of the text can it be construed as corroborative of Lincoln's and Lloyd-Jones' view. However, when the change of prepositions is taken together with the other grammatical considerations mentioned by Robinson and the context of the passage, which is the whole body of Christ, as Lincoln admits, the most natural interpretation of the text is that put forward in this essay. It is difficult to see in the contrived interpretation of Lincoln anything but a desperate attempt to maintain a clergy-centred doctrine of the CHURCH that is alien to the text, alien to the New Testament and indeed alien to the whole Bible.

Lincoln lists those who argue for the interpretation put forward in this essay and those against it. Here they are. For it are: Westcott, Robinson (whom I have cited above), Roels, Bruce (whom I have also cited above), Käsemann, Gnlika, Klauck, Barth, Caird, Mitton, Mussner, Bratcher and Nida. Against this interpretation and for the clerical interpretation are: Abbott, Dibelius, Hanson, Masson, Schlier, Ernst, Merklein, Schnackenburg and Hamann.

Lloyd-Jones, like so many other clergymen with vested interests in the institutional Church, espoused a clergy-centred view of the CHURCH and of the faith. The whole of the Christian life in this perspective revolves around the clergy and their calling. Such a perspective empties this text of its vital force and implication for the

Christian community. Lloyd-Jones adopted this interpretation of Eph. 4:12 because the text did not fit his pietistic view of the world and the Christian's service in the world (or rather lack of it). Furthermore, his use of disparaging terms such as the "ordinary, average members of the Church" for those members of the family of God who are not ordained ministers, in comparison with the "special callings" of those who are, also demonstrates admirably the sacred/secular divide that is implicit in this perspective.

We must reject, therefore, Lloyd-Jones' interpretation of this text. It is the CHURCH, the body of Christ in the widest sense, that is to engage in the work of service and thereby build up the CHURCH, the body of Christ. The task of the ordained ministry is to equip the saints for this service; the ministry is the training arm of the CHURCH.

## Appendix C

### COTTONIAN “INDEPENDENCY” AND THE HIGH PRESBYTERIANS IN THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY

ALTHOUGH the model of Church government set forth in this essay occupies in some respects the ground between Independency and Presbyterianism, it has some points of similarity with the model of Church government set forth by John Cotton in his book *The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven* (1644), which is considered a classic statement of early Congregational ecclesiology. (This was the book that converted John Owen to Congregationalism.<sup>84</sup>) Cotton and the dissent-

84. Owen states in his *A Review of the True Nature of Schism* (1657): “I set myself seriously to inquire into the controversies then warmly agitated in these nations. Of the congregational way I was not acquainted with any one person, minister or other; nor had I, to my knowledge, seen any more than one in my life. My acquaintance lay wholly with ministers and people of the presbyterian way. But sundry books being published on either side, I perused and compared them with the Scriptures and one another, according as I received ability from God. After a general view of them, as was my manner in other controversies, I fixed on one to take under peculiar consideration and examination, which seemed most methodically and strongly to maintain that which was contrary, as I thought, to my present persuasion. This was Mr Cotton’s book of the Keys. . . . In the pursuit and management of this work, quite beside and contrary to my expectation, at a time and season wherein I could expect nothing on that account but ruin in this world, without the knowledge or advice of, or conference with, any one person of that judgement, I was prevailed on to receive that and those principles which I had thought to have set myself in an opposition unto. And, indeed, this way of impartial examining all things by the word, comparing causes with causes and things with things, laying aside all prejudicate respects unto persons or present traditions, is a course that I would admonish all to beware of who would avoid the danger being made Independents.” (*A Review of the True Nature of Schism, with a Vindication of the Congregational Churches in England from the Imputations Thereof, Unjustly Charged on them by Mr D. Cawdrey in Works* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth (Goold Edition) (1657), 1967]) Vol. XIII, p. 223f.)

ing brethren in the Westminster Assembly were vilified as Independents by the high Presbyterians of the day, by the Scottish commissioners to the Assembly, and particularly by Robert Baillie, who sought to discredit Cotton and the dissenting brethren by all the means available to him.<sup>85</sup> However, an examination of Cotton's book, which was printed in England with a Preface by two of the leading Independents in the Assembly, Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye, shows that the form of Church government then being put forward by the Independents was one in which presbyteries (called synods in Cotton's book) had an important role, but in which a balance of power and authority was maintained between such presbyteries and the local Churches. This balance was argued on the basis of biblical example and teaching and represents a principle that neither Presbyterianism nor Congregationalism as it subsequently developed have ever achieved in practice. But the nature of Church government was seen by these early Independents as *ministerial* not *magisterial*, or, as Cotton put it, "their office [i.e. the office of elders met together in synod—SCP] is *stewardly*, not *lordly*,"<sup>86</sup> whereas for the high Presbyterians Church government was seen as magisterial in nature.

This was an important difference between the two parties, and their differing interpretations of the point at issue had far reaching implications for the character of the two types of Church government. But it was at bottom an issue relating not so much to the *form* of Church government as to its *nature* or character. It was this disagreement over the nature of the power and authority exercised by the Church authorities that, more than any other issue, separated Presbyterians from Independents in the Assembly. Other than on this fundamental point the only real difference between Cotton's so-called Independent model and that of the Presbyterians was that in Cotton's model the *administration* of ordination and excommunication would be at the level of the local Church, though the determi-

85. Larzer Ziff, ed., *John Cotton on the Churches of New England* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 31ff.

86. John Cotton, *The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven* (1644) in Larzer Ziff, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

nation, declaration and publishing of such would be a matter for synod (i.e. presbytery) also.<sup>87</sup>

Unfortunately, Cotton's book has seldom been reprinted and hardly promoted by the modern Reformed movement, which seems to have moved consistently away from the Reformed theology it supposedly espouses, and which seems to have taken up the cudgels for the magisterial form of Church government espoused by the high Presbyterians.

It is my conviction that, had it not been for the compromise necessitated by alliance with Scotland at the outbreak of the first Civil War and the consequent influence that the Scottish commissioners exerted on the Westminster Assembly, the form of Church government hammered out by the Assembly would have been very close to this model put forward by John Cotton—and would have therefore constituted a genuine English Church settlement—rather than the magisterial Scottish model that eventually got foisted upon the Assembly and its published deliberations. Of course this is speculation. But it is informed speculation that can be supported by historical evidence concerning the ecclesial mind-set of those English divines who attended the Assembly.<sup>88</sup> The dissenting brethren in the Assembly rejected the charge of separatism, asserting that they occupied a middle way between Presbyterianism (i.e. the Scot-

87. *Ibid.*

88. It has been shown that many of the English Presbyterians in the Westminster Assembly were only nominally Presbyterian and would have supported a moderate episcopacy, had that been possible, rather than a Presbyterian system on the Scottish model. The majority of English Puritans at the outbreak of the first Civil War were not Presbyterian in the Scottish sense (see Robert S. Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord* [Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1985], pp. 101-132). The English people on the whole were then—and have been ever since—more enamoured of Episcopalianism than of Scottish Presbyterianism, and perceived keenly that in the latter "*New Presbyter* is but *Old Priest* writ large," to use the words of John Milton. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't! Even Richard Baxter, the leader of the English Presbyterians after 1660, said "I found not sufficient Evidence to prove all kind of Episcopacy unlawful" (cited *ibid.*, p. 106). Milton's poem *On the new forcers of Conscience under the Long PARLIAMENT* adequately summed up the way most English Puritans felt about the Presbyterian system as this was interpreted in the Westminster Assembly by the Scottish commissioners and by those sympathetic to their cause in the Assembly and in Parliament. See also the quotation from Baxter in note 92 below.

tish magisterial model) and Brownism (separatism).<sup>89</sup> They resolutely maintained the establishment principle no less than the Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Erastians.<sup>90</sup>

89a. In the Preface to Cotton's *The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven* Thomas Goodwin and Philip Nye stated: "As for ourselves, we are yet, neither afraid, nor ashamed to make profession (in the midst of all the high waves on both sides dashing on us) that the substance of this brief extract from the author's larger *discourse*, is that very *middle way* (which in our Apology we did in the general intimate and intend) between that which is called *Brownism*, and the *presbyterial government*, as it is practised; whereof the one doth in effect put the chief (if not the whole) of the rule and government into the hands of the people, and drowns the *elders'* votes (who are but a few) in the major part of theirs: and the other, taking the chief and the principal parts of that rule (which we conceive is the due of each *congregation*, the *elders* and *brethren*) into this jurisdiction of a common *presbytery* of several *congregations*, doth thereby in like manner swallow up, not only the interests of the people, but even the vote of the *elders* of that *congregation* concerned in the major part thereof" (Preface to Cotton's *Keys of the Kingdom* in Larzer Ziff, *op. cit.*, p. 77).

b. John Owen occupied this same ground between separatism and Presbyterianism, as propounded in Cotton's *The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven*, as the quotation in note 84 above shows. Furthermore, commenting on his early book *The Duty of Pastors and People Distinguished* (published in 1643, but with the date 1644), in which he professed himself a Presbyterian, Owen says in his *A Review of the True Nature of Schism* (1657): "I was then a young man myself, about the age of twenty-six or twenty-seven years. The controversy between Independency and Presbytery was young also, nor, indeed, by me clearly understood, especially as stated on the congregational side. The conceptions delivered in the treatise were not (as appears in the issue) suited to the opinion of the one party nor of the other, but where such as occurred to mine own naked consideration of things, with relation to some differences that were then upheld in the place where I lived. Only, being unacquainted with the congregational way, I professed myself to own the other party, not knowing but that my principles were suited to their judgement and profession, having looked very little farther into those affairs than I was led by an opposition to Episcopacy and ceremonies. Upon a review of what I had there asserted, I found that my principles were far more suited to what is the judgement and practice of the congregational men than those of the Presbyterian. Only, whereas I had not received any farther clear information in these ways of the worship of God, which since I have been engaged in, as was said, I professed myself of the presbyterian judgement, in opposition to democratical confusion; and, indeed, so I do still, and so do all the congregational men in England that I am acquainted withal. So that when I compare what then I wrote with my present judgement, I am scarce able to find the least difference between the one and the other; only, a misapplication of names and things by me gives countenance to this charge"—i.e. that he altered his judgement in the matter of ecclesiology. (*A Review of the True Nature of Schism* in *Works*, Vol. XIII, p. 222f. my italics) See above note 84.

90. Congregationalism subsequently developed more towards the separatist



The influence of the Scottish commissioners, however, once it had triumphed in the Assembly,—but not in the country, where high-Presbyterianism was always unpopular<sup>91</sup>—had, subsequently, the unfortunate effect of forcing the members of the Assembly to align themselves on either side of a particular denominational line that could only bring dissent rather than unity. The result was a polarisation that could have been avoided were it not for the intransigent position adopted by the Scots and their constant determination to exploit their presence in the Assembly in order to foist uniformity with their own system on the English Church. This development, and the sectarianism that inevitably accompanied it, could only be detrimental to an English Church settlement that would have united the various parties represented in the Assembly in a national Church structure. England was, as a consequence, denied an English Church settlement that was biblically derived and acceptable to the English people, the greater number of which, Puritan divines included, desired an accommodation to all parties rather than an enforced uniformity.<sup>92</sup> When the Presbyterians, keen to

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model of Church government that the original Independents in the Westminster Assembly had declared themselves against, and also towards the “democratical confusion” that John Owen said he had never met with support for among the Congregational men of his acquaintance (see note 89*b* above).

91. Peter Toon, *Puritans and Calvinism* (Swengel, Pennsylvania: Reiner Publications, 1973), p. 63

92. Baxter claimed that “though most of the Ministers (then) in *England* saw nothing in the Presbyterian way of *practice*, which they could not cheerfully concur in, yet it was but few that had resolved on their *Principles*: And when I came to try it, I found that most (that ever I could meet with) were against the *Jus Divinum* of Lay Elders, and for the moderate Primitive Episcopacy, and for a narrow Congregational or Parochial Extent of ordinary Churches, and for an accommodation of all Parties, in order to Concord, as well as myself” (cited in Robert S. Paul, *op. cit.*, p. 110. Such an accommodation of all parties is an ideal for which I have much sympathy). Furthermore, Cromwell twice offered the Presbyterians an opportunity to establish a Presbyterian State Church in England, the only proviso being that they would not be permitted to enforce uniformity. They refused to accept this proviso on both occasions (Charles H. Firth, *Oliver Cromwell and the Rule of the Puritans in England* [New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1900], p. 250*f.*). Eventually the Cromwellian Church settlement was established, which did for a period realise this accommodation of all Protestant parties (with the exception of the Episcopalians, but for political rather than religious reasons) in a form of Protestant ecumenical-

grasp power and the chance to enforce their magisterial system,—that is, secure for their presbyteries the power that had accrued to the bishops before the interregnum—eventually seized what they considered to be a ripe opportunity and threw their weight behind the Restoration of Charles II, the hope of such a settlement was lost and the triumph of Episcopacy was assured. The final irony was that, as a result of their own handiwork, the Presbyterians in England were forced into their "nightmare scenario," viz non-conformity, and persecuted in Scotland by their much beloved king.

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ism in the Church of England. Even Richard Baxter, who was no friend of Cromwell's, said that the Church in England prospered greatly during this period (Toon, *op. cit.*, p. 69). Unfortunately it was short lived. After Cromwell's death and the failure of Richard Cromwell's Protectorate the Presbyterians seized their opportunity, as they saw it, to gain power, but this only succeeded in bringing the full Reformation of the Church of England to an abysmal end. Once in power the new king had no intentions of fulfilling the misguided aspirations of the Presbyterians nor of honouring whatever promises they might have thought he had made regarding their Church polity.

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THERE is perhaps no subject that Christians have discussed, debated and argued over more fiercely than that of the nature, government and function of the church. And the arguments have not been merely over denominational issues, but over issues within and specific to particular denominations, with representatives from various denominations sometimes holding some of the same views. But if it is true that this subject has been discussed at such length and argued over so fiercely, why does it need to be addressed again? Because, the author believes, the church has not yet arrived at a satisfactory conclusion regarding this matter. However, the message of this book does not primarily address narrowly denominational issues. Rather, the author attempts to set out biblical principles that can, in the main, be acted upon and applied in all Christian churches, regardless of denomination. In this way the author seeks to apply the Reformation dictum *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*—"the reformed church is always fit to be reformed"—to the modern church in order to encourage a more faithful practice of the church's great commission in our day.

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Stephen C. Perks is the Director of the Kuyper Foundation, a charitable trust dedicated to the advancement of the Christian religion and the revival of Christian civilisation.

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