

No.6. The Headship of the Church

In worldly societies there is recognition of the fact that there must be some kind of structure and government in place in order for the given body to function with some degree of unity & harmony. Moreover, since men of the world are aware of the need for a system of government within their organisations how much more aware should God's people be of such a need within the Church. As we have noted already, the Church is a divine & spiritual institution comprised of those who have been called out of the world of the ungodly in order to serve Christ & witness for Him. Consequently, Christ's true Church is opposed in its witness by the powers of hell, with every ounce of Satan's energy exercised to destroy it. Therefore, in order for the Church to continue its work for Christ, it must, among things, have a system of government under which it functions.

DIFFERENT THEORIES CONCERNING CHURCH GOVERNMENT

There are various theories among those who recognise the need for church government.

The Quakers & the Brethren -- examples of those who reject all Church government; indeed it is a matter of principle with such groups to do so. Such groups teach that church government necessarily degenerates producing results that are contrary to the spirit of Christianity; that it exalts the human element at the expense of the divine; that it leads to neglect of divinely given gifts by substituting human offices; and that the Lord's people are given only the husk of human knowledge and are deprived of the vital direct teachings of the Holy Spirit. Thus, such groups will teach that it is sinful to organise the Church, and that offices are not needed and that in worship each simply follows the leading of the Holy Spirit.

The Erastian system -- named after Erastus, 1524-1583. He taught that the Church owes its existence & form to regulations enacted by the State; that the officers of the Church are mere instructors of the Word of God, with no right to rule; and that the State is to govern the Church, to exercise discipline and to excommunicate. This is the system followed by the Lutheran Church in Germany and elsewhere. But its obvious error is that it conflicts with the fundamental truth of Christ's Headship as revealed in Scripture.

The Episcopalian system -- that Christ as Head of the Church has entrusted its government directly and only to an order of bishops or prelates, who are the successors of the Apostles; and that these prelates are a separate, independent and self-perpetuating order. This system means that the members of the church have no share in its government. Such a separate class of church rulers, who are not appointed by the people as their representatives, has no warrant in Scripture at all. The Apostles were a separate class, but it was not their role to rule and administer the affairs of the church. The Apostles were supernaturally gifted evangelists & founders of churches, and they then had men from these congregations appointed to rule. Moreover, before the end of the first century the office of the apostle ceased.

The Roman Catholic system -- the Episcopal system carried to its logical conclusion. The Roman system claims not only successors to the Apostles but also a successor to Peter, who is alleged to have had primacy among the apostles. The so-called successor of Peter is looked on as the special representative of Christ, the vicar of Christ. Thus, the Roman system is in essence an absolute monarchy, under the control of an infallible pope, who supposedly holds the right to determine & control the doctrine, worship and government of the church. Under the pope there is a series of orders, to whom, it is claimed, special grace is given, whose duty is to administer the rule of the church under strict accountability to their superiors and ultimately the pope himself. Hence, the people have absolutely no voice in the governing of their system. The Roman system has no warrant in Scripture and its claims of an unbroken line of successors to Peter are contradicted by history also. The papal system is Biblically and historically untenable.

The Congregational system -- also known as "independency." The principle of congregationalism means that each church is autonomous and independent of every other, with the governing power resting exclusively with the members. Thus, church officers have no ruling power beyond that possessed as members of the church, and the office of the ministry is altogether dependent on the action of the people. The theory of independency fails to do justice to the Scriptural position of the unity of the Church and means that there is no right of appeal with respect to any of the decisions of the local congregation.

The Presbyterian system -- is a representative system in which the congregation appoints its own officers, elders and deacons, who represent them in the church courts. The elders are the spiritual rulers of the church with the solemn task of overseeing the flock of God and ruling in the house of God.

THE PRESBYTERIAN VIEW OF THE HEADSHIP OF THE CHURCH

Church government necessarily involves headship. As noted, the Roman system's central tenet is the headship of the pope. Against this blasphemous intrusion, the Presbyterian position is that Christ is the Head of the Church.

Christ is of course what is termed the *organic Head* of the *invisible*. But the real battle with regard to headship in the Church pertained to Christ's being the only lawful Head of the Church visible. That battle was fought not only at the time of the Reformation but later also in Scotland and in Holland especially. The Pope and the King of a given nation could hardly claim to be organic head of the invisible church, but they did claim to be head of the visible church in that they claimed to be supreme rulers in the visible congregation. Thus, it was here that the battle was fought. Our Presbyterian forefathers certainly believed that Christ is the organic Head of the Church of the Redeemed. But they also maintained that He is the only lawful head of the visible church and is therefore the only supreme Lawgiver and King of the Church.

CHRIST'S HEADSHIP

Christ is Head over all things, Eph 1: 22. Thus, He is Lord of the universe, not only as the second person of the Trinity but in His mediatorial capacity also in that He has been exalted as a reward of His sufferings and has been given universal authority, Matt 28: 18. Note from Eph 1: 22 that Christ's universal headship is for the sake of and for the benefit of the Church -- He is "*head over all things to the Church.*" That is, for the benefit and good of the Church. The sense is that since Christ is in absolute control of all things in the world, all that happens is ultimately for the good of the Church.

But, as noted, in a very special sense Christ is Head of the Church. As its organic Head -- note in v.23 the Church is referred to under the analogy of the "body." He is Head and the Church is the body, denoting an organic union. The two are joined, and He is the life of the body. In the human body the head is the source and centre of life and power. There is not a part

of the human body that is not controlled by the nervous system that has its source in the head or brain. Thus, we have no spiritual life or energy but that which comes from Christ. Note in v.23 the words, "*the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.*" Christ fills the body, His Church, with His own spiritual life, so that He is the organic head.

However, as its Ruler and King, Christ is Head of the Church. Thus, in its visible life and position in this world the Church is recognise the authority and rule of no one but Christ, Matt 23: 8, 10; Eph 4: 4, 5, 11, 12.

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