

No.8, Presbyterian Church Government

Over the past two weeks we have viewed -- (a) *The Headship of the Church*; (b) *The Government of the Church*. These two themes are inseparably connected. Christ is the only Head of the Church. He is an absolute monarch, exercising supreme authority in the Church. Moreover, His headship of the Church is manifested in certain ways, one them being that He provides for the government of the Church. It is, of course, spiritual government, designed to secure the order & discipline of the Church and to maintain purity of doctrine and worship. It is essential to the well being of any society or organisation that it shall be under rule and be guided by certain regulations. But such is imperative for the Church, a spiritual & divine institution, comprised only of sinful men & women saved by sovereign grace, witnessing for Christ in a hostile world in the face of a formidable foe. It is essential that the Church have a form of government to ensure that she is under the law of Christ.

In the study on *The Headship of Christ* we noted some of the forms of Church government to which various bodies adhere. And when dealing with *The Government of the Church* we focused on the matter of the officers of the Church, simply stressing that the government that Christ has ordained for His Church is to be implemented through the offices that He has instituted and therefore through the men who occupy those offices. In closing last week, it was noted that the two permanent offices in the Church are those of elder and deacon, as is seen in various N.T. Scriptures, especially in a passage like 1 Tim 3.

As a Presbyterian Church we recognise these two offices; and as far as the matter of spiritual government in the Church is concerned, we believe, again in the light of Scripture, that the elders of Christ's Church are entrusted with the spiritual oversight and government of His people. Essentially then, we believe in the *Presbyterian* form of Church government, and I felt it would be beneficial to set before you some of the main tenets of Presbyterianism.

THE NAME PRESBYTERIAN IS DERIVED FROM THE N.T. WORD FOR ELDER

The Greek word for "elder" is *presbuteros*, thus Presbyterianism takes its title from this word for elder, and in recognition of the right of spiritual rulership that Christ invested in the office of the elder. It was worth noting therefore, that to use the word "Presbyterian" as a title or name to distinguish Christ's Church is perfectly Scriptural and legitimate. It is simply a title that reflects the form of Church government revealed in the N.T.

THE ESSENCE OF PRESBYTERIANISM IS THAT IT UPHOLDS THE VISIBLE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

Christ's Body, the Church of the Firstborn, is one, Eph. 4: 4. In other words, there is one company of true believers, who are all spiritually united with one another. It is a spiritual unity that already exists by virtue of union with Christ. Joined to Christ, all genuine believers are joined to one another. Consequently, it is surely desirable that a visible company of professing Christians should at least seek to reflect the spiritual union that they have with one another.

Such is desirable and moreover I would suggest to you that churches that follow the Presbyterian model of government does provide a reflection of the spiritual and corporal unity of the Church, while other systems such as Episcopacy and Independency do not. Episcopacy creates a hierarchy setting the "clergy" apart from the "laity" and displacing the concept of the spiritual unity of all believers. Independency teaches that particular congregations of believers are completely separate from one another with no interdependency, and this is certainly not a true reflection of the Church of Scripture, for there we see both the unity and the interdependency of believers.

IN THE N.T. WE SEE A PLURALITY OF CONGREGATIONS BEING REFERRED TO AS THE CHURCH

In the early Church period vast numbers of converts existed in Jerusalem itself, Acts 5: 14, Acts 21: 19, 20 -- where the word for *thousands* means, "myriads." It is a word that denotes immense companies, Heb 12: 22 -- where the term "*an innumerable company of angels...*" is literally "myriads of angels." The clear implication of this language is that since there were vast numbers of believers in Jerusalem alone there must have been many congregations. See Acts 2: 46 -- the use of the term "from house to house" is reference to congregations of believers gathering in certain homes, for there was nowhere else to meet. But see Acts 8: 1, 3 -- here we note another reference to believers from *every house* being incarcerated, i.e., believers from a plurality of congregations, yet they are referred to as "*the church*."

Another example -- 1 Cor 1: 2, "*the church of God which is at Corinth*." But compare ch. 14: 34 -- "*let your women keep silence in the churches*." The point is that there was obviously a plurality of churches in Corinth. See also Acts 18: 10 -- "*I have much people in this city...*" i.e., with reference to Corinth. Thus "much people..." and a plurality of congregations yet addressed in 1 Cor 1: 2 as the church singular.

IN THE N.T. THE PRESBYTERY WAS THE CONNECTING LINK BETWEEN THE CONGREGATIONS

The word "presbytery" is referred to in 1 Tim 4: 14, "*the laying on of the hands of the presbytery*." The original word for "presbytery" is *presbuterion*, which literally means, *the elderhood* or *an assembly of elders*. Thus, there was a particular assembly of elders that had laid hands on Timothy, which is understood to be a reference to ordination. But the point is that concept of an assembly of elders or presbytery is clearly in view. See also Acts 13: 1-3 where a group of presbyters is obviously in view.

But here is the point. Each church had a plurality of elders, Acts 14: 23. Therefore, the presbytery, being an assembly of elders, must have been comprised of the elders of various congregations coming together. This is certainly in view in Acts 15 in that a company of men came together to make a spiritual decision. But the language with reference to those who comprised the company makes it clear that it was a meeting of elders -- it was a Presbytery meeting therefore. The conclusion therefore is that this assembly of elders or this presbytery was the connecting link between the various congregations.

IN THE N.T. IT IS SHOWN THAT THE PRESBYTERY HAD THE OVERSIGHT OF THE CHURCHES ALSO SHOWING THAT THEY WERE ONE, INTERLINKED AND INTERDEPENDENT

Again 1 Tim 4: 14 -- the presbytery ordained Timothy, a minister serving the Lord at Ephesus, ch.1: 3. Thus, the presbytery was responsible for the spiritual oversight of the church by ordaining ministers like Timothy. As noted Acts 13: 1 records the meeting of a church court, obviously exercising spiritual oversight in the sending forth of ministers to preach the Gospel. Acts 16: 4, 5 -- the decision of the elders in Jerusalem was binding on all the churches and resulted in their spiritual prosperity.