

CHAPTER 4.

AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH

Authority figures. If you refer to them in a group setting, you will almost certainly pick up on some negative vibes sooner rather than later.

Slow and unresponsive. Cold and uncompassionate. Domineering and micromanaging. Self-serving and, at times, oppressive.

These are some of the sentiments that people have about authority figures in their lives. Citizens may feel this way about their governing officials. Students may think about their teachers along these lines, and members of a church may view their leaders—ministers, elders, and deacons—in a similar light. Not surprisingly, then, if you were to ask fellow Christians for the top five blessings that they experience in their lives, few, if any, would mention offices or authority within the church. In fact, some Christians question whether we even need a system of church government at all. They would be inclined to say that so long as everyone is using their God-given gifts and talents (Rom 12:6–8), that should be sufficient and perhaps even more pleasant.

However, Scripture speaks differently. Both apostles and pastors, who have positions of authority, are listed among the blessings that Christ has given to his church (Eph 4:8, 12). In fact, governing with zeal is mentioned after financial generosity and before showing mercy in another list of gifts to be used for the common good (Rom 12:8). Added to that, it was Christ himself who gave the keys of the kingdom to his church,

and one of those keys is church discipline, which requires authority to exercise it properly (Matt 16:18–19; 18:15–18). On behalf of Christ, the apostle Paul instructed Titus to “appoint elders in every town” (Tit 1:5). So, if some Christians are not keen on office and authority within the church, they need to reconsider their position. After all, it is Christ himself who establishes this authority when he says, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt 18:18).

Once it is clear that God’s Word requires a certain authority structure within the church, there are still many questions that remain. How many and what kind of positions of authority should there be? What model should the government of the church follow? A business model? A template taken from politics? If these structures are not a good starting point, then what is?

In this chapter we will take an initial look at some of these questions. Now, lest we raise expectations that cannot be met, the details of church government really belong to a specialized area of study called church polity. Covering all the finer points of church polity would require another book, not a chapter. However, we will look at the big picture and focus on some key points of doctrine that should shape sound church government. Along the way we want to link authority in the church with other things we have already learned. For example, how does the identity of the church (see chapter 1) impact the nature of authority within the church? Or how does unity, one of the attributes of the church (see chapter 2), determine how one congregation interacts with another congregation?

WHOSE CHURCH IS BEING GOVERNED?

Before discussing the topic of church government any further, we need to concentrate on the one to whom the church belongs. The answer is, of course, clear: Jesus Christ. For instance, we read in Acts 20:28 that Christ bought the church with his own blood, and if he bought it, then he owns it. This fact is pivotal because it follows that all aspects of church

government must then be in harmony with who Christ is and how he works.

Many people can point to examples of how authority within the church is misused by egocentric or vindictive leaders. Undoubtedly many of these stories are true. However, such ungodly leaders are ignoring the most fundamental fact of church authority: Christ is the one who has, and always retains, the ultimate authority within the church. Those who serve in the church must conduct themselves in a Christ-like manner; otherwise they are betraying the Leader whom they serve and contravening his authority.

There are other passages in Scripture which underline the same basic truth. In John 10:14 Jesus Christ refers to the members of the congregation as sheep; he even calls them “*my* sheep.” In other words, the flock rightly belongs to him. Even if the Good Shepherd brings in other, subordinate shepherds to administer his care for his sheep, there should never be any doubt as to which shepherd owns the sheep. Christ himself declares, “They are mine.”

Next, as we have noted before, the apostle Paul uses the common analogy of the head and the body to teach believers about the relationship between Christ and his church (Eph 1:22–23; 4:15–16). The relationship between head and body is not only intricate but it also involves a certain kind of authority. It is true that the head makes many decisions and sends out signals to various parts of the body, instructing them what to do. However, it is equally true that the body is in constant contact with the head, giving it all sorts of different feedback. In this way the head exercises its authority over the body within a close and mutually beneficial relationship. In short, there is nothing egocentric or oppressive about the way our head treats our body.

Closely related to this head-and-body analogy is the relationship between a husband and his wife. This, too, is found particularly in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. In the fifth chapter of that letter we learn that the “church submits to Christ” (v. 24). In Scripture submission is connected

with authority (1 Cor 11:3, 10; Heb 13:17). Since we confess that the church is the bride of Christ, we ought also to be consistent and acknowledge that this will necessarily involve a relationship of authority and submission.

Finally, one more biblical image is pertinent here. Under the Lord's blessing, one day a bride becomes a mother. Not surprisingly then, the apostle Paul also speaks of the church as a mother (Gal 4:26). This maternal character of the church is also found in the Old Testament (Isa 54:1–8). Connected with this, the church is known as the household of God (1 Tim 3:15). Once again, within a household there is a special relationship of authority, which is definitely a blessing and a benefit. Children must honour and obey their parents, and the parents must exercise loving leadership over their children. A godly family works best that way. Following this through, we should expect the same with God's household. There ought to be loving leadership from the side of those in authority, and there ought to be honour and obedience from the side of those under authority.

In short, it is noteworthy that nearly every major analogy that the Bible uses to describe the church involves a relationship of authority. Ownership, shepherding, headship, marriage, family—they all involve authority in one way or the other. Added to that, it should be said, if they are understood and applied properly, the authority structure within each one of these relationships is an integral and blessed part of what makes the relationship work well. Consequently, these scriptural analogies also speak volumes about the manner in which authority in the church should function, which is the next thing on our agenda.

HOW SHOULD THE CHURCH BE GOVERNED?

There are at least four main principles that outline the manner in which the church of Christ should be governed. In the first place, the exercise of authority within the church should be thoroughly permeated with genuine love, just as a godly relationship between a husband and a wife, or parents and children, is filled with love. Authority without love is like

a fish out of water, flapping around furiously but swiftly on its way to death.

Secondly, the connection between those in authority and those under authority should be close and comprehensive, just as the communication between the head and the body is intimate and extensive. Too often relationships of authority take a turn for the worse when there is too much distance between the two groups involved. If parents do not take the time to talk to their children and listen to their joys and struggles, then it will be all the harder for children to appreciate their parents' instructions, since they will feel that their parents do not understand what they are all going through as children. Similarly, if leaders in the church spend even half as much time listening to members of the church as the head does in "listening" to its body, there would be far fewer problems and conflicts in the church.

Third, there ought to be a certain multidimensional quality to the care that those in authority provide. A shepherd not only prods the sheep who wander off the path, but he also guides them to the green pastures and quiet waters (Ps 23). He gathers up the lambs in his arms and carries them (Isa 40:11). In short, it is multifaceted care. Likewise, those with authority in the church should aim not only to correct and rebuke, but also to encourage and comfort—with great patience and careful instruction (2 Tim 4:3). In this way pastoral care becomes comprehensive care, and the sheep of the flock will grow to appreciate what their leaders are doing for them (Heb 13:17).

Finally, if we are looking for a governance template to follow within the church, then the world of business management and political systems is not the best place to look. Rather, the place to look is much closer to home; in fact, it *is* the home, that is, the household. It is not without reason that in 1 Timothy 3 the Holy Spirit teaches that both elders and deacons must be men who can manage their own households well. After all, if a man cannot properly guide his own household, how can he fulfil the responsibility of taking care of God's household (vv. 4–5, 12)? Naturally, since congregations are generally larger than one single family,

various adaptations will have to be made in order to accommodate their larger size. However, in motivation, character, and ethos, the exercise of authority within the church should resemble a well-run household rather than a Fortune 500 company or a successful political party.

Stepping back, then, to look at the big picture, we see that authority within the church inevitably takes a turn for the worse when leaders and congregation members alike forget that it is the church *of Christ* that is being governed. As soon as that Christ-centred focus is lost, problems of laxity, legalism, hierarchy, and coercion begin to grow like weeds in a garden. All those in positions of church leadership must remember that they are under the authority of Christ, ambassadors who must reflect his gracious yet just care and guidance (2 Cor 5:20). All those under authority within the church must show respect for those in authority, remembering that Christ is the one who has given them leaders as yet another gift of grace (Heb 13:7, 17).

GOVERNING BY THE SPIRITUAL ORDER

After dealing with the difference between true and false churches, the Belgic Confession continues with an intriguing statement. This is how it reads: “We believe that this true church must be governed according to the spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in his Word” (Art. 30). What precisely is this “spiritual order”? To begin with, this should be linked to Acts 20:28, where the apostle Paul says to the elders of the church in Ephesus, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, *in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers*” (emphasis added). In other words, the ascended Lord Jesus Christ puts office-bearers in place through the working of the Holy Spirit. Although the Holy Spirit began planting these seeds in the Old Testament (Num 11:16–17), the buds only break open into full blossom in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus Christ commissioned his apostles by breathing on them and saying, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22). When the Holy Spirit was poured out on Pentecost Day (Acts 2), Christ brought the church into a new era. All church-building activity, including the work

of office-bearers and the use of authority, is filled with the presence and power of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16; 1 Pet 2:5).

We should recognize that some people see things differently. For them, the work of the Holy Spirit, including spiritual gifts, is one thing; office and authority within the church is another. In fact, they see a progression, which begins already in the New Testament and continues into early church history. In sum, their idea is this: leadership within the church began as a spontaneous, charismatic, and Spirit-driven work, but over time structure, office, and authority became more dominant. In support of their position they may point to the apparent contrast between one of Paul's earlier letters, such as 1 Corinthians with its extensive treatment of spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12–14), and his later letters to Timothy and Titus, which speak more about the requirements for office-bearers (1 Tim 3; Titus 1). Proponents of this idea often believe that the less restrictive and more charismatic beginning represents what is not only more original but also more desirable. In a nutshell, they see it as something that the church should recapture today.

A closer look at Scripture quickly reveals, however, that any contrast between a charismatic beginning and a more office-dominated continuation is a false dilemma. For one thing, the whole concept of office-bearers, especially elders, has a history which long precedes Pentecost. Elders who serve God's people, also with the authority to judge difficult situations, are found already in the days of Moses (Exod 3:16; 18:21–23). They serve in special capacities later on as well, including their role in the laying on of hands (Lev 4:15) and in guiding and caring for the people (Num 11:16). Already then, they fulfilled their roles by the power of the Holy Spirit who had been given to them (Num 11:17, 25).

The combination of, rather than contrast between, office and Spirit continues in the New Testament. No sooner is the Holy Spirit poured out (Acts 2) than the church is quickly seeking new office-bearers, namely, deacons, because the responsibilities were too numerous for the apostles to fulfil all by themselves (Acts 6:1–6). These new office-bearers had to

be men who were “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (Acts 6:3). Once again, the Holy Spirit and offices in the church are not contrasted but combined.

Next, as the apostle Paul begins bringing the gospel to the Gentile nations, one of the first things that Barnabas and he do is appoint elders for the new believers in each new church (Acts 14:23). The elders of Jerusalem are also involved in the first broader assembly of the Christian church (Acts 15:2), and their deliberations were guided by the Holy Spirit, a blessing which they specifically mention in their letter conveying the official decision (Acts 15:28). Finally, as mentioned previously, it is the Holy Spirit himself who puts office-bearers into their positions of authority (Acts 20:28). As we can conclude when we pull this all together, the Word of God is sufficiently clear that charisma and office do not represent two phases of the Christian church, let alone two opposite poles of the Christian life. On the contrary, they are intricately woven together. The Holy Spirit embraces the importance of office; in fact, he is the very one who equips men to serve within it.

This also means that the “spiritual order” mentioned in the Belgic Confession is an order illuminated and guided by the Holy Spirit. It is really “Spiritual order,” with a capital “S.” Furthermore, as the Confession has-
tens to add, this spiritual order is not vague, secretive, or mysterious, since it is what our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us in his Word (BC 30). This also fits with Christ’s royal status. A king governs by his word, that is, by giving instructions to his officials and citizens. In a much greater way, our ascended King governs his church through the Spirit-inspired Word. Therefore all exercise of authority within the church must carefully and comprehensively follow the Word of God.

Since the church is governed by a Spiritual order, its leaders should ensure that they demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit as they go about their official duties. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control: these are the qualities that should characterize leaders within the church (Gal 5:22–23). To be sure, no leader in the church is as full of this spiritual fruit as he should be. Office-bearers,

too, are growing in grace, just like the rest of us. Nevertheless, those who follow the ways of the sinful flesh rather than the Spirit cannot effectively govern the temple of the Holy Spirit, which is the church. But the opposite is also true. When leaders in the church prayerfully rely on the Holy Spirit, following his inspired Word in all things and demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit as they fulfil their duties, the church is greatly blessed and should be deeply grateful.

WHO GOVERNS?

So far we have discovered that authority in the church is Christ-centred and Spirit-guided. Yet this leads to another question: practically speaking, who is going to govern Christ's church on a daily basis? This question is relevant because the King of the church is no longer with us here on earth but has ascended to heaven. Undeniably, there is something that needs attention here. The Shepherd is in heaven, but his sheep are on earth. How can the Shepherd take care of his sheep when he is not physically close to them?

An answer to this question is provided in the first letter of the apostle Peter. Jesus Christ is the "Shepherd and Overseer" of our souls (1 Pet 2:25). At the same time and interestingly so, later on in the same letter the Holy Spirit reveals that Jesus Christ is not the only shepherd of God's flock. Peter addresses the elders of the churches with these words: "Shepherd the flock of God that is among you" (1 Pet 5:2). But how can these elders be shepherds of God's flock when Jesus Christ is the "Shepherd and Overseer" of our souls, especially since Christ himself said, "There will be one flock, *one* shepherd" (John 10:16; emphasis added)? At first glance this may seem to lead straight into a contradiction. However, the Spirit of God quickly resolves the matter in 1 Peter 5:4 when he says to the elders, "And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory." So, there is one, and only one, chief Shepherd, who is Christ. However, under Christ there are many sub-shepherds, and they are called elders of the church. These sub-shepherds need to be diligent that they never act as if they were the chief Shepherd. Instead, depending upon him and submitting to his Word, they

are the ones who govern the church on a daily basis, both publicly in the worship services and privately from house to house (Acts 20:20).

In speaking about who governs the church, then, the best place to begin is with the elders. Not everyone in the church is an elder, and not everyone is gifted to be an elder either. The Holy Spirit has given rather detailed lists showing what kind of men must be sought to serve as elders. These lists can be found in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9. It is also important that they have the right attitude. Peter instructs the elders that they should serve “not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:2–3).

These elders are to supervise our doctrine and life as members of the church. They are to ensure that we are clearly instructed in the truth of the gospel. They are to give us personal and practical guidance in the proper way to live in thankful gratitude to our Mediator and Deliverer. They must also warn us, and if necessary discipline us, if we cling to false teachings or ungodly lifestyles. In order to do all of this effectively, they should regularly visit us, the members of the church, as faithful sub-shepherds who are close to the sheep and understand what is going on in their lives (BC 30).

At the same time, within this group of elders there is a division of duties. In 1 Timothy 5:17 the apostle Paul speaks about a particular group of elders who are devoted to the work of preaching and teaching. Elsewhere these men are called shepherds, or pastors, and teachers (Eph 4:11), and they do “the work of an evangelist” (2 Tim 4:5). Preaching and teaching God’s Word is a beautiful but also a weighty and time-consuming task. No one man can do everything within the church—at least, he cannot keep it up for very long. For this reason the Holy Spirit wisely created a division of labour. There are elders who focus on supervising and governing and there are ministers of the Word, also called pastors, who focus on preaching and teaching.

Undoubtedly there will be some overlap between the duties of these two offices. Furthermore, there must be close co-operation between them. Yet the Word of God directs congregations to cherish and maintain both offices and to do so in such a way that elders and ministers of the Word keep their own distinct functions but always work together in harmony. Blessed is the church that has diligent elders and a faithful minister of the Word as well!

There is also one more regular, or ordinary, office in the church, and that is the office of deacon. The King of the church established this office early on, shortly after Pentecost (Acts 6:1–6). At that time the apostles made a request for new office-bearers, whom we now call deacons, so that they could devote themselves “to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4). Since authority within the church should include comprehensive care, attention is to be given to the physical and material needs of church members as well. As James explains, it is all well and good to rejoice in the salvation that we share in Christ, but if your brother or sister in the church does not have enough money to buy clothes or food, then something is drastically wrong (Jas 2:15). As he writes elsewhere, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction” (Jas 1:27). Even so, taking care of the poor, the widows, the orphans, and the sick can be a very time-consuming task. Thus, in his wisdom the Holy Spirit guided the church to establish a further division of labour: not only are there to be elders and ministers of the Word, but also deacons, who focus on ensuring that no one in the church struggles with financial or health issues all on his or her own.

Much like what applies in the case of the elders, not everyone is qualified to be a deacon. In 1 Timothy 3:8–12 the Lord gives a careful description of the kind of men that can serve as deacons. This does not mean that everyone in the congregation should just stand aside and let the deacons do all the work among the lonely, poor, or sick. On the contrary, the entire congregation is obliged to help their brothers and sisters in the faith, also when it comes to financial and health-related matters. How-

ever, the deacons have to show leadership and ensure that the necessary things do happen.

With these three offices in the church—those of ministers, elders, and deacons—the flock of God is well tended. Each office, and each office-bearer, is under the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. Each office, and each office-bearer, is completely dependent on the Holy Spirit, and needs to function in accordance with the revealed Word. However, when all of this is in place, the church is well served and built up in a positive and pastoral manner.

There is one more aspect that should briefly have our attention. In Ephesians 4:11 the apostle Paul mentions other office-bearers in addition to the pastors, elders, and deacons. There are also apostles, prophets, and evangelists. The apostles were unique because they had the special qualifications of knowing Jesus Christ personally while he was here on this earth and seeing him after his resurrection (Acts 1:21–22; 1 Cor 9:1). Obviously, those qualifications resulted in small group of men who served the church for a limited time. Once they and their generation died, others could not replace them because the next generations did not include eyewitnesses of Christ's resurrection.

Nevertheless, the apostles had a fundamental role in the development of the church. To the church at Ephesus the apostle Paul wrote, “You are . . . members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph 2:20). In other words, through their teaching and the letters that the Spirit inspired them to write, the apostles laid the groundwork upon which future generations of believers and church leaders could build. As Paul indicates, the same applies to Old Testament prophets, such as Elijah and Isaiah, and the New Testament prophets, such as Agabus and Barnabas (Acts 11:27; 13:1). Once the foundation of the church was laid, such special offices were no longer needed. For this reason they are commonly called *extraordinary offices*. Meanwhile, the *ordinary offices*, still functioning today, are those of the ministers of the Word, elders, and deacons.

Of course, that still leaves the office of evangelist. The challenge here is that beyond Ephesians 4:11 this word is used only twice. Once it refers to a young minister of the Word, named Timothy (2 Tim 4:5). Another time it refers to a deacon, named Philip (Acts 21:8). Therefore in a certain sense the work of an evangelist is included within the ordinary offices, especially that of ministers of the Word. In any case, this is the way it has been generally seen. It may well be wise to leave it at that, rather than creating a separate office of evangelist, particularly when we are working with so little scriptural evidence.

SPECIAL TOPICS

Under the general heading of authority and offices within the church there are a number of special topics that call for extra attention. As mentioned at the beginning of this lesson, our present purpose is not to dive into all the practical details that might arise. That is the task of someone writing a book on church polity. However, there are a few that have significant doctrinal implications and should be explored briefly.

Equality of Office-bearers

All office-bearers are sub-shepherds of the chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ (1 Pet 5:2, 4). This implies that they are all equal. Regrettably, when office-bearers take their eyes off Christ and start to focus on other things, then a hierarchy of office-bearers can easily develop. For example, if elders focus on their years of experience in office, then it is natural to think that those with more experience have a higher position than those with less experience. Similarly, within a group of deacons there may be one man who is particularly gifted for the work and may be regarded as some kind of archdeacon. Working with principles like these, some churches have developed an elaborate system of office-bearers with various levels of hierarchy, some higher and some lower.

Scripture speaks differently, though. Unlike the political systems of this world with hierarchies of officials, the kingdom of Christ operates on the principle of service, not seniority (Matt 20:25–26). In connection with this, it is striking that the apostle Peter addresses other elders as a fel-

low elder. More specifically, he writes, “So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder . . . shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (1 Pet 5:1, 2). Surprisingly, Peter does not appeal to a higher rank here. After all, Peter was an apostle, and one who, from the start, had been within the inner circle of the three disciples who were closest to Jesus (Matt 17:1). What is more, it was Peter who took the lead on the day of Pentecost and explained the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:14). In sum, Peter was an experienced, highly respected, and courageous apostle. Yet, remarkably, while speaking to a group of relatively new elders, he addresses them as “a fellow elder.” This sets a valuable example of how equality should be maintained among all office-bearers. Office-bearers should regard each other as co-shepherds, not ranking one above another, but all submitting together to Christ, the Chief Shepherd.

Women in Office

To continue with the topic of equality for a moment, life has changed for many women over the last number of decades. Today there are more women involved in business. There are still many male CEOs but there are also a growing number of female CEOs. In addition, in many countries women are involved in politics. Some women have even become presidents and prime ministers. To be brief, in many areas of life men and women are equally involved in the same tasks and responsibilities. It is therefore not surprising that people begin to ask whether women can also hold positions of authority within the church. For them it is simply a matter of equality between men and women.

Although it may not be surprising that the question comes up, it is disconcerting how many churches do not faithfully follow Scripture in this regard. Too often the line of argumentation goes something like this: some women are just as gifted, perhaps even more gifted, than various men within the congregation, so should we not have the most gifted people serving in positions of authority? In fact, sometimes there is even a shortage of men who are qualified and willing to serve in office. Thus, it is argued, if a woman is both able and willing to serve in office, who are we to stop her?

But there is one significant problem with this line of logic. Since the church of Christ is the temple of the Holy Spirit, we must follow the Spiritual order that Christ has revealed in his Word. In 1 Timothy 2:12 the inspired apostle Paul says, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man.” Perhaps someone will object and say, “Yes, but Paul is giving instructions for what was best at that time, in the first century A.D., when patriarchy was still prevalent.” However, the Holy Spirit does not ground his instructions in the culture of that day but rather in the order of creation. He gives the following reason: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Tim 2:13). Whether it is the tenth century B.C., or the first century A.D., or even the twenty-first century A.D., that creation order will never change. It remains true, always, that Adam was created first and then Eve. Therefore in the church of Christ women are not ordained to positions of authority. This is also confirmed by the fact that the list of qualifications for elders and deacons mentions that the men must be “the husband of but one wife” (1 Tim 3:2, 12).

For deacons the situation is more complex because Scripture also speaks of Phoebe, the deaconess (Rom 16:1). Although different translations render this word differently, Scripture does speak literally of a deaconess. At the same time, the word *deacon* or *deaconess* does not always refer to an ordained position. It can refer more generally to one who serves or helps other people (Matt 22:13; John 12:26; Rom 13:4). This is likely the sense in which Phoebe is called a deaconess. Suffice it to say that the Word of Christ does not allow women to hold positions of ordained office within the church and thus have authority over men. That is a transgression of the created order, not just a cultural phenomenon (1 Tim 2:8).

Nonetheless, women contribute in many substantial and significant ways within the church. A quick look at Scripture reveals that women were a vital part of the support for Jesus Christ (Luke 8:1–3). Dorcas was an enormous blessing to the church at Joppa and would have been someone from whom the deacons benefited immensely (Acts 9:36). Finally, Paul lists Euodia and Syntyche, two sisters in the faith, among his group of “fellow workers” (Phil 4:2–3). It is clear, then, that sisters in the Lord

contribute to the life of the church in diverse ways; however, we must show respect for Christ's Word and refrain from ordaining women.

Local Church and Federation of Churches

On the first missionary journey of the apostle Paul, elders were appointed in every local congregation (Acts 14:23). Later, Paul continued the same practice when he instructed Titus to follow his direction and "appoint elders in every town" (Titus 1:5). This also fits the pattern of the opening greeting that the apostle gives to the elders and deacons of church in Philippi (Phil 1:1).

All these verses point in the same direction. The New Testament reveals a picture of local elders in a specific congregation in a certain town or city, rather than office-bearers who have authority over a larger area or territory. In keeping with the analogy of a shepherd and his sheep, this makes good sense. Shepherds and their sheep need to be close to each other and know each other well. If office-bearers are appointed to a large, regional territory, it will be difficult for them to know the sheep of the flock well enough to care for them properly. Thus, the Reformed approach to church government has always emphasized the authority of Christ as exercised locally by the office-bearers who are duly appointed and ordained within a particular congregation.

At the same time, this does not mean that the churches of Christ should swing in the direction of independentism. Since the catholic church of Christ is one (see chapter 2), and since the church is, by nature, a visible assembly of believers (see chapter 1), it makes sense that this unity should be expressed in a visible, concrete way. Moreover, this is precisely what we observe on the pages of the New Testament. When important and far-reaching decisions need to be made, the early church did not rely upon the wisdom of just a few local office-bearers. Instead, various brothers from different locations were appointed to meet together, discuss the issues, and come to a godly consensus. Then they also took care to communicate this decision clearly to all the churches (Acts 15:1–35).

In the language of church polity such a gathering of delegates from various local congregations is called a *broader assembly*. Please note: not higher assembly, which would suggest hierarchy, but broader assembly, which allows for the wisdom of a geographically larger group of elders to prevail. There may be various broader assemblies: a localized classis of various churches, a wider regional synod, and finally a general or national synod. A group of churches working together in such broader assemblies is called a federation of churches. Such a federation of churches provides support and guidance to local congregations in matters of doctrine and discipline but also in times of need. The churches in and around Jerusalem were very poor due to persecution. For this reason the apostle Paul, as he went on his missionary journeys, collected money from the churches of Asia Minor to help the churches in Judea (Rom 15:28; 1 Cor 16:1–2). In this way the unity of believers, even when separated by geography, becomes a tangible reality.

State and Church

Jesus Christ always made it clear that his church is not a political entity. Even when he referred to his kingdom, or the kingdom of heaven, he was at pains to explain that his kingdom is not an earthly kingdom, which operates according to the rules of political systems, whether ancient or modern. For example, Jesus clearly said to Pontius Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world” (John 18:36). In addition Jesus repeatedly warned his own disciples not to think of his kingdom as an earthly kingdom (Luke 12:13–14; Matt 20:25–28).

There are also earthly, civil governments that have an important task to do. They are called to uphold the cause of justice for those who do right and punish those who do wrong (Rom 13:3–4). Scripture consistently teaches that the officials in civil government should be respected (Rom 13:1–2, 5; 1 Pet 2:17) and taxes should be paid (Mark 12:14–17; Rom 13:7). Moreover, government officials should be upheld in prayer to the Lord (1 Tim 2:1–2). The church has summarized how the state

should be respected with these words, “Moreover, everyone—no matter of what quality, condition, or rank—ought to be subject to the civil officers, pay taxes, hold them in honour and respect, and obey them in all things which do not disagree with the Word of God” (BC 36). To summarize things, the church and the state each has its own realm of responsibility under the ultimate sovereignty of God, and they should be careful not to intrude upon each other’s jurisdiction.

Suggested Readings: Exodus 18:13–27; 1 Peter 5:1–5

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. The common metaphors that the Holy Spirit uses to describe authority within the church, such as shepherd and sheep, as well as head and body, are overwhelmingly positive. Yet so easily the use of, and respect for, ecclesiastical authority falls into disarray due to sin. Where do we usually go wrong? How can our exercise of, and appreciation for, authority be restored to more scriptural norms?
2. Scripture reveals a parallel between how a household is managed and how a congregation, which is the household of God, is governed (1 Tim 3:5, 15). List three ways in which that inspired parallel should become evident in our church life. Also, discuss a couple of things that may apply in a family setting but do not work so well in a congregation.
3. How can office-bearers ensure that they continue to follow a Spiritual order as they govern the church entrusted to their care, without falling into legalism or liberalism?
4. If certain church leaders are becoming more dictatorial than pastoral, how should the congregation handle this problem? Passages that may help in your discussion include Ezekiel 34:1–10, 1 Timothy 5:19, Titus 3:10–11, and 3 John 9–12.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Even if there is a good division of labour among the office-bearers, they still tend to be very busy men, especially if they have children still living at home and businesses to run. In what concrete ways

can members of the church take on tasks within the congregation so that our ministers, elders, and deacons do not become overloaded? Try to think of ways to help those in all three offices, and not just the deacons. If everyone pitches in to help, how will we maintain a proper distinction between the office of all Christians (i.e., the office of prophets, priests, and kings) and the special offices?

2. Consider how women are involved in your congregation. Are there other ways in which they could serve, without unwittingly opening the door to having women in office some time down the road? Priscilla and Aquila, her husband, were involved in teaching Apollos (Acts 18:2, 26). In what circumstances may a woman teach and in which contexts is this forbidden (1 Tim 2:12)?
3. Finding a good working relationship between local churches is a challenge. On the one hand, one local church should not coerce other local churches into doing everything in precisely the same manner that it has chosen to do things. On the other hand, a local church should not be so independent-minded that it does not seek wisdom from, or unity with, other faithful churches. How can we cultivate a healthy relationship within a federation so that local authority is duly respected but independentism is also diligently avoided?

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