

A Well-Ordered Church

Laying a Solid Foundation
for a Vibrant Church

William Boekestein and Daniel R. Hyde



EP BOOKS

1st Floor Venture House, 6 Silver Court, Watchmead,
Welwyn Garden City, UK, AL7 1TS

web: <http://www.epbooks.org>

e-mail: sales@epbooks.org

EP Books are distributed in the USA by:

JPL Distribution

3741 Linden Avenue Southeast

Grand Rapids, MI 49548

E-mail: orders@jpldistribution.com

Tel: 877.683.6935

© 2015 by William Boekestein and Daniel R. Hyde. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

First published 2015

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-78397-073-5

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are from the **New American Standard Bible®**, copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org)

Scripture quotations marked KJV are from **The Holy Bible, King James Version**.

With loving gratitude to
Art Boekestein:
exemplary Christian,
true churchman,
devoted grandfather.
—WB

To all my former pastoral interns,
who have gone out
seeking to bring the order of Christ's kingdom
into the chaos of the world.
—DRH

Contents

Abbreviations	7
Foreword by Dr. Cornelis Venema	9
Introduction	13
Part One: Identity	17
One: The Church's Relation to Christ	19
Part Two: Authority	29
Two: Not Human Preference But Divine Revelation	31
Three: Christ Ministers Through Officers	41
Part Three: Ecumenicity	51
Four: Within a Denomination	53
Five: Outside of a Denomination	65
Part Four: Activity	77

Six: A Teaching Church	79
Seven: A Worshiping Church	91
Eight: The Practice of Our Worship	101
Nine: A Witnessing Church	113
Ten: The Practice of a Witnessing Church	125
Eleven: A Repenting Church	137
Conclusion: The Need for God-Glorifying Church Governance	149
Afterword by Dr. Michael Horton	155
Foundational Principles of Reformed Church Government	159
Bibliography	163
Endnotes	171
Scripture Index	183
Confessions Index	189

Abbreviations

BC—Belgic Confession

CD—Canons of Dort

HC—Heidelberg Catechism

WCF—Westminster Confession of Faith

WLC—Westminster Larger Catechism

Foreword

One of the more remarkable passages in the New Testament Gospels is the account in Matthew 16 of the apostle Peter’s confession that Jesus is the “Christ.” In the account, we are told that Jesus pressed his disciples with the question, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” This was a question regarding Jesus’ identity and mission. But when Peter responds by declaring that Jesus is the “Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus seems to change the subject. In response to Peter’s confession, Jesus promises that he will build his church “on the rock” of Peter’s true confession concerning him: “on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18).

I deliberately use the language “seems to change the subject” because in a profound sense Jesus doesn’t change the subject at all. Because Jesus’ identity is that of the Son of God, the one whom the Father sent into the world to save his people from their sins, his identity and mission are bound up with the gathering of his people and the building of the church. When Jesus is truly known and confessed, he is known and confessed as the one who is gathering a people for himself as his prized possession. The mission of Christ is to build the church by gathering, preserving, and protecting those whom he redeems from their sins and restores to fellowship with himself and the Father.

What is remarkable about this passage is that it strikes at the heart of any understanding of the Christian faith, or of what it means to believe in Jesus Christ, that leaves the church out of the picture. It is simply impossible to embrace Christ while rejecting his church. The doctrine of Christ—“Christology”—is inseparable from the doctrine of the church—“ecclesiology.” There is no other Christ than the biblical Christ, and the Christ of the Bible has no other mission than the building of his church as “a dwelling place for God by the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22).

For this reason, it is regrettable that in evangelical circles in North America, especially, there is so little appreciation for the integral place of the church in the life of believers. The church is often viewed as a voluntary organization, which may be joined or left at a whim. Membership in a local church is viewed in no more lofty terms than membership in any voluntary association. Furthermore, professing Christians are frequently quick to join their voices to those with contemporaries who lambaste the church, or act as though they were able to enjoy a meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ without bothering with it.

Contrary to the unbiblical tendency to disparage the church of Jesus Christ, the authors of *A Well-Ordered Church* present a different portrait of the church. Rather than joining the chorus of critics, they go back to the teaching of Scripture and offer a compelling case for viewing the church of Jesus Christ as the place where Christ is pleased to dwell by his Spirit and Word. Proceeding upon the basis of Scripture, and utilizing the wisdom codified in the church orders of the historic Reformed churches, they echo the church’s biblical and ancient conviction that life in Christ is imparted and nurtured within the fellowship of Christ’s church. Far from diminishing the importance of the church, they are convinced that, if you would have God as your Father for the sake of the work of his Son, Jesus Christ, then you must have the church as your mother. A rightly-ordered and vibrant church is

indispensable to the fulfillment of the Great Commission Christ gave to the church, to make disciples of all the nations until the end of the present age (Matthew 28:20).

Readers of this book may not agree with the authors at every point. But if they read with care, they will undoubtedly be impressed with the book's combination of biblical instruction, historical awareness, and pastoral wisdom. They will certainly come away with a greater appreciation for the way Christ is present and active in the life and ministry of the local congregation of which they are members. By providing additional suggestions for reading, as well as questions for reflection, the authors enhance the usefulness of their book for Christian believers and church office-bearers who desire to see the church thrive and prosper under Christ's blessing.

Dr. Cornelis Venema

President and Professor of Doctrinal Studies
Mid-America Reformed Seminary, Dyer, Indiana

Introduction

The Green Bay Packers football team had been a losing franchise for almost ten straight years. They were at the bottom of the standings, and morale was sagging. Vince Lombardi was hired as the new coach in 1959 and challenged to turn the franchise around. He began leading practices, inspiring, training and motivating. But at one point in a practice, he became so frustrated with how things were going that he blew the whistle. “Everybody stop and gather around,” he said. Then he knelt down, picked up the pigskin, and said, “Let’s start at the beginning. This is a football. These are the yard markers. I’m the coach. You are the players.” He went on, in the most elementary of ways, to explain the basics of football.¹

Every now and then as Christians it is good and necessary to get back to basics. Martin Luther (1483–1546) once said that even as a trained theologian:

Each morning, and whenever else I have time, I do as a child who is being taught the catechism and I read and recite word for word the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Psalms, etc. I must still read and study the catechism daily, and yet I cannot master it as I wish, but remain a child and pupil of the catechism—and I also do so gladly.”²

The goal of this book is to bring us back to the basics of *ecclesiology*, or, the biblical doctrine of the church. Here we want to say, “This is a church,” in the most basic and fundamental of ways. And to help individual Christians, Bible study groups, leadership training, and existing leadership engage in an ongoing program of education, we have included discussion questions and further reading to each chapter. As we lead you through these basics of the church we recognize that the principles we promote are neither perfect nor exhaustive.³ Nor will they all fit nicely into alternative views of church government.⁴ But we believe they are drawn from Scripture and that they do help us to answer the following significant questions about the church.

Identity

The first question we hope to answer concerns our *identity*. What is the church in general? Who are we as a church in particular? Who we are as individuals and as a church is vitally important in determining how we live. It’s so easy as a local church to become branded by unbiblical and unhelpful definitions. Do we define ourselves as the only true church in a dark community, and therefore stay in our enclave? Do we define ourselves primarily as a family that has banded together for the sake of community? Do we define ourselves as a dysfunctional church that is barely managing to maintain an existence? Do we define ourselves by our traditions? Definitions do matter. They help shape our identity as well as our sense of what we do. Definitions can also be encouraging or discouraging. But if we as a church understand who God says we are we will be encouraged and energized.

Authority

The second question a biblical ecclesiology answers concerns *authority*. On a practical level, from whom do we as a church receive our marching orders? How does a church make decisions? If we get this point wrong we will have no sense of direction because we won’t know who is leading us. Some churches tend to

answer this question rather strictly with a hierarchical arrangement that you must follow ... or else. Others answer this question rather loosely; everyone in the church is free to do “what [seems] right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). The answer to the question of functional authority matters in very practical ways. Are members of the congregation required to submit to everything a pastor or elder board says? Conversely, is the pastor merely giving *suggestions* in his sermons and counseling? Is the pastoral counsel of the elders on family visitation to be received merely as information or as a word from God? Do the deacons have anything to say regarding the financial choices of our families?

Ecumenicity

The third question is one we don’t think much about: *ecumenicity*. The question here is, how should one church relate to other churches? The Bible teaches that there is one true universal church, called by Christ and uniting around his Word (John 10:16). While this church is “catholic” or universal in scope, as the ancient Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds confess, it is concretely represented by myriad local congregations. In considering ecumenicity we wrestle with how these congregations relate to each other. We answer the question, “How do we appropriately express the catholicity of the church?” This question pertains to the issue of pulpit exchanges. It helps us come to terms with the level of cooperation that should exist between congregations with varying degrees of doctrinal affinity. It relates to joint worship services (say for Reformation Day or Thanksgiving Day).

Activity

The fourth question concerns the church’s *activity*. What is our mission? What should we as a church be doing? Are we fulfilling our mandate as a church? How do we even know unless our mandate is clearly spelled out? How does the corporate mission of the church relate to the particular mission of individual Christians? In other words, what is your role as a member of a local body of

Christ in the overall ministry of the church? Given that every church has limited resources we need to determine whether or not we are spending our personal and corporate energies in the right places.

These four areas of ecclesiology are critical for us to answer as Bible-believing, Gospel-preaching, mission-minded churches in the twenty-first century. As we wrestle with the Scriptures to find answers to our churches' identity, authority, ecumenicity, and activity, the answers we derive will be like the firm foundation to a building that lasts. This biblical foundation will result in our churches being structured in a well-ordered way, enabling us to do things more "decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:40). Paul wrote these words to the disorderly church in Corinth whose worship was full of "confusion" (1 Corinthians 14:33). Instead of confusion, God desires peace; instead of disorderliness, God desires order. On another occasion, writing from prison to the church in Colossae, Paul praised good church order and the blessings that flowed from it: "For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ" (Colossians 2:5). As we reflect upon this solid foundation and structure in the Scriptures, we will experience a flow of vitality both inside the church as well as outside of it in a dark world.

One final note before we begin: Throughout this book we will be basing our arguments on many Scripture texts (see Scripture Index); for the sake of brevity many will be simply noted. We encourage you to delve into these passages in more detail by looking them up in study Bible notes or Bible commentaries such as Matthew Henry, John Calvin, and/or the New International Old/New Testament Commentary series.

Part One

Identity

Chapter One

The Church's Relation to Christ

After I^I was converted from unbelief, the church I attended had a “baptism Sunday.” It was at that time that someone asked me, “Do you want to be baptized?” I had no idea what that was all about so I asked about it. I was told it was my personal choice to express my personal belief in Jesus. When the day came I was told to stand in a line; then my turn came and a microphone was thrust in my face: “Why do you want to be baptized?” Being the cocky basketball player I was, I think my answer was something like, “I believe in Jesus. Let’s do this!”

My Christian identity was my own personal thing. I had no idea how I related to my local church. I had no idea how *my* church related to *the* church or its Lord, Jesus Christ. No doubt this experience and blissful ignorance can be multiplied in our day. The only appropriate place to begin formulating our identity as Christians and churches is with Jesus Christ. This approach lifts up the church beyond how things seem in the here and now. This approach relieves us of the temptation of thinking too highly of ourselves as a church, on the one hand, and of thinking too negatively of ourselves as a church, on the other.

The Church Belongs to Christ

Understanding the church's identity as rooted in Christ will also help us avoid a churchless Christianity, in which individual believers are members merely of the "invisible church" while not connected to a local body, and a Christ-less churchianity, in which the church is merely a collection of individuals existing for social purposes. Instead we begin with Jesus Christ, who is Lord of the church in the New Covenant. That he possesses the church and that it belongs to him is taught throughout the New Testament through the illustration of the church as a building. Jesus is the builder of the church (Matthew 16:18). Jesus is described as the foundation and cornerstone of the church (1 Corinthians 3:11, Ephesians 2:20). Jesus' possession of the church is also taught metaphorically; he is the vine and we are the branches (John 15:1–11). He is the shepherd and we are his sheep in the sheep pen (John 10:1–18). He is the head and we are the members of his body (Romans 12:3–8). He is the husband and we are his bride (Ephesians 5:25–33).

In our time of the virtual online church, "every member ministry" with no connection to ordained leadership, and the prevalence of the "just me and my Bible" attitude, it is necessary to hear again the basic biblical message as summarized by the Protestant Reformation confessions of faith: "the visible Church ... is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation" (WCF, 25.2). It was to this visible church and not to any person or para-church organization that Jesus gave the keys of his kingdom (Matthew 16:13–20). Furthermore, biblical Christians believe, "since this holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation, that no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be, ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself; but that all men are in duty bound to join and unite themselves with it" (BC, art. 28).² The institutional, visible church is so vital! At the same time, in reading the above quotations, we need

to resist the pendulum swinging to the other extreme in which we equate the local church with salvation. Every true church finds its identity in the incarnate Son of God—not itself.

We may be accustomed to thinking of individual Christians as being the possession of Christ; we confess, “That *I*, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not *my* own, but belong to *my* faithful Savior Jesus Christ” (HC, Q&A 1).³ But, not only are individual Christians bought with the blood of Christ, so is the church as a whole (Acts 20:28). This is expressed in a classic hymn:

The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is His new creation by water and the Word;
From heaven he came and sought her to be His holy bride;
With his own blood he bought her, and for her life He died.⁴

Christ gave his life for his bride, which is the entire body of the elect (Ephesians 5:25–27). This identity-in-Christ has profound implications for the church.

First, this teaches us that Christianity is not just a “me and Jesus thing.” If I am a believer then I am a member of the body of Christ (Romans 12:3–8) and must live out my Christian life in a covenantal, church context (Romans 12:9–21). It doesn’t take long to realize that life in the church is not easy; other Christians are not always easy to get along with. In times of frustration I need to remember that I am not the sole possession of Christ. His blood has also graciously covered those who annoy, frustrate, injure, and sometimes hate me. As Paul says, “As the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Colossians 3:13) precisely because he gave his life for *that* other sinner.

Second, regardless of our personal view of the church, “as far as God is concerned, nothing in the whole world is more precious than the church of Jesus Christ.”⁵ If we could share God’s perspective we

would stop grumbling about the church. We would, instead, have a much higher view of the church than we presently do. Yes, the church militant is fraught with wrinkles. But the church is Jesus' wife (Ephesians 5:25–33; Revelation 19:6–9). Imagine the audacity of openly criticizing and grumbling against the wife of one of your best friends. Unthinkable! Why is it that we are so free to grumble against the bride of Christ? Perhaps we forget the implications of our identity.

Third, the church owes a tremendous debt of gratitude to the Lord (Romans 8:12). Our obligation, not only as individuals, but as members of Christ's body working together, is to do whatever we can to glorify him. This urgent sense of gratitude should keep from neglecting to participate in service opportunities within the local body.

The glorious reality that the church belongs to Jesus Christ closely relates to the next principle that describes the identity of the church.

Christ is the Head of the Church

Because the Lord Jesus Christ bought the church in his capacity as the “one mediator between God and men” (1 Timothy 2:5), it follows that he is the “head of the church” (Ephesians 5:23; Colossians 1:18). The word “head” (*kephale*) when used in a figurative sense refers to a position of authority.⁶ The head on your body is the authority of the rest of the body. Decisions move from the head to the body; never the other way—at least they shouldn't. It would seem to be a given that every church agrees that Christ is the head of the church. But the reality is that some churches practically ascribe the headship of the visible church to a human prelate, whether pope, pastor, or board. This is why Reformed churches confessed so strongly that Jesus was the head of the church, not the Pope. At the beginning of the Reformation era, one of the earliest confessions of faith was “The Ten Theses of

Bern" (1528), which began with this statement: "The holy catholic church, whose sole head is Christ, has been begotten from the Word of God, in which it continues, nor does it listen to the voice of a stranger (art. 1)." At the height of the Reformation movement the Westminster Confession of Faith was produced, which said in its original version: "There is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof, but is that Antichrist, that man of sin, and son of perdition, that exalts himself, in the Church, against Christ and all that is called God" (WCF, 25.6).

Christ's headship implies at least two important things. First, because Christ is the head of the church, he administers "as head over all things to the church" (Ephesians 1:22) and he does so "to the praise of *his* glory" (Ephesians 1:12). In other words, the church does not exist primarily for us but for him: "that in everything he might be preeminent" (Colossians 1:18). How's that for a reality check to pastors, elders, deacons, and all church members? As humans we all want to be happy. But Paul's teaching means that we should not expect the church to exist to make us happy. To borrow the language of the game of chess, we are the Lord's pawns. That is, we exist to further his purpose. The frustration that we sometimes feel toward our church may be due to our unreasonable expectations of the church and, sometimes, our lack of involvement in it. On a personal level this means that you and I cannot consider ourselves members of Christ if we refuse to submit to his administration of all things (Ephesians 1:23).

Second, because Christ is the head of the church he also provides for the body. Our minds were wired with an innate tendency toward self-preservation, which is only circumvented in severe circumstances. Similarly, Christ, as our head, is our Savior, our protector and provider (Ephesians 5:24). One of the ways he provides for and protects his people is through the church. If it's true that the church is not primarily about us, it's also true that:

One of God's great gifts to the Christian is the church. [The church] is for us, because God is for us too. The worship, though ultimately for God, is meant for our edification—for believers' edification, not immediate resonance with nonbelievers (though we want our services to be intelligible to them too). Just as important, think of the *one another* commands. Church should be a place to bear each others burdens, meet physical needs, express comfort, demonstrate care, exercise hospitality, exchange greetings, offer encouragement, administer rebuke, receive forgiveness—basically faith working itself out in love. And isn't love for each other the distinguishing mark of the Christian community?⁸

How does the church's identity in Christ address the sad opinion many today have of the church? Paul refers to the church as "the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:23). The assertion that Christ is the head of the body is the most honorable thing that we can say about the church in general, and about our local congregations. We are not great because of who we are or how many programs we have, but because of who our head is.

The Unity of the Church

As already suggested, our identity in Christ has profound implications for unity within a church and the unity of the church in general. This "vertical" identity of union with Christ forms and informs our "horizontal" identity in communion with other believers. Our union with Christ means that we already have a spiritual unity in Christ with other Christians; and as churches, with other churches. As we will see later, this relates significantly to the way congregations relate to each other (chapters 4–5 below) because ecumenicity speaks, first and foremost, of our identity in Jesus Christ.

In other words, a church is a church because of its unity in Christ and his Word. In contrast to the Roman Catholic Church, identity is not merely found in an organizational structure.

Likewise, a Christian is not simply someone who belongs to the right church. Later, we will address the Bible's teaching on how churches should unite organizationally. But the church's identity is foundationally a spiritual unity in Christ and in the Scriptures.⁹

The church is a "holy congregation of true Christian believers, all expecting their salvation in Jesus Christ, being washed by His blood, sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit" (BC, art. 27).¹⁰ This is the point of Matthew 16. After Peter had just confessed Jesus to be "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16), Jesus responded by saying that Simon's name was Peter (*petros*) and that upon "this rock" (*petra*), meaning, his confession of Christ, Jesus would build his church (Matthew 16:18).¹¹ Apart from a solid foundation in Jesus Christ, there is no church; nor is there any unity among believers. If we are trying to be unified based on common interests, personal friendships, socio-economic status, racial grouping, or even a joint mission we are at risk of losing the right to be called "church." The church is unified *in* Christ because the church derives her identity *from* her union with Christ (Ephesians 2:20).

This identity and unity is unfolded to us in the Holy Scriptures. We come to know who we are and how we should live based on the authority of God's recorded speech in the Old and New Testaments. A church cannot be a church if it does not receive the Scriptures as absolutely authoritative. Paul makes the point in 1 Timothy 3:14–16 that the church, which is the "pillar and buttress of the truth," understands how to conduct itself as such a church only from what Paul wrote to them, in other words, from sacred Scripture. Our study of Scripture should never, therefore, be for solely private purposes. The Scriptures are constantly transforming our sense of who we are as a church and "how [we] ought to behave in the household of God" (1 Timothy 3:15).

Dennis Johnson illustrates this point from the Book of Acts. He

asks a simple question: “Who needs the book of Acts?” He answers by painting a scenario that may be somewhat similar to our own:

Churches drift off to sleep. Small groups turn in on themselves. Bible studies and Sunday school classes tread predictable, timeworn paths. Worship becomes routine. Witnessing becomes the work of specialists ... When familiarity breeds contentment and complacency, when good order calcifies into rigid regularity, then people who love Jesus sense that something is amiss. They know that it was not always this way, and they turn to the Book to see again what is truly normal for Christ’s church. In particular when our zeal flags and our focus blurs, we need to listen [as Scripture] recounts the Spirit’s acts in the Spirit’s words.¹²

As we see imitable images of the church in Scripture that have no reference point in our congregation we repent of our sins and humbly talk about our flaws and what we might do to restore our biblical identity with God’s help.

The idea of a universal body of Christ is brought down to earth, so to speak, in local congregations. This means that we need to learn how to live a well-ordered life *together*. As a church we need leaders who will guide us in this endeavor. We need to figure out how to relate to other congregations. We need to figure out just what it is we are to do as a church. But any discussion about the authority, ecumenicity, and activity of the church must begin with understanding its identity in relation to Jesus Christ. True churches, like true believers, are rooted in Christ who reveals himself in his Word, and not rooted in our preferences, felt-needs, or convenience.

Questions

Why should we even be concerned to discuss and study the church and its government? Isn’t this just a “secondary” issue?

Why is our understanding of the biblical structure and organization of the church important?

What is Christ-less Churchianity? What is Churchless Christianity? How can both be avoided?

Can you describe a time when you have had unrealistic and self-serving expectations of a local church?

In what way is the church a gift from God?

Without being destructively critical, can you identify ways in which the Scriptures may challenge the ordering of the church of which you are a part?

For Further Reading

Sean Michael Lucas, *What is Church Government?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009).

Philip Ryken, *City on a Hill: Reclaiming the Biblical Pattern for the Church in the 21st Century* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003).

J. L. Schaver, *The Polity of the Churches, Volume 1: Concerns All the Churches of Christendom* (Chicago: Church Polity Press, 1947), 65–77.

Guy Prentiss Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011).