

## *Attempted Recovery*

We take up the story at the start of the 16th century with Martin Luther. But before we do, let us remember that protest against the mutilation of Christ's church was not unknown during the dark ages. Men and, no doubt, women – men like Claude of Turin (died 827), Tanchelm (died 1115), Peter of Bruys (flourished c1117-c1131), Henry of Lausanne (flourished c1116-c1148), Arnold of Brescia (1110-1155), John Tauler (c1300-1361), John Wycliffe (c1328-1384), John Hus (c1369-1415), the Lollards and their like, should never be forgotten. They all made their protest against Rome, and in one way or another called for a return to the New Testament. I am not pretending that they had full gospel light. But, in their various ways, they all prepared the ground for the approaching Reformation.

And so to the dawn of the 16th century. When they came onto the scene, the magisterial Reformers did a sterling job in getting back to New Testament teaching on salvation. They also re-established the principle of the final authority of Scripture in all matters of faith and conduct, thus enabling subsequent generations to reform in areas where the Reformers themselves did not understand Scripture, or failed to apply it to their own Churches. For the fact is, sadly, the Reformers left a great deal to be desired in the matter of church life. They made bad mistakes in this area. They failed to jettison much of the corrupt medieval way of looking at the church, and so failed to return to the New Testament pattern. If only they had! Alas, it is a case of what might have been. Grievously, many, treating them as virtual oracles, have fallen foul of John Robinson's observation, and ground to a halt where Luther and Calvin left them.

On the matter of the priesthood of all believers, for instance, while the Reformers did resurrect this New Testament doctrine, they failed to appreciate its full importance and scope, limiting it far, far too much to the personal, the individual. Yes, of course, it was a mighty weapon in the battle against Rome – to be able to tell sinners, as individuals, to go straight to Christ; that there was no need of, no place for, an intermediary – yes, this was liberating

indeed. Again, to be able to assure believers that they had the right of private judgement, that they could and should think for themselves – yes, another tremendous advance over despotic Rome. But, as for the corporate aspect of the priesthood of all believers, too often the Reformers limited it to responsive reading and participation in psalm or hymn singing – all far too heavily institutionalised. Nevertheless, to bring the language of worship into the vernacular was an immeasurable gain. And to allow participation in worship by the congregation, not to limit the laity to gawking at priests doing it for them, was another huge advance.

But, as I say, it was all too liturgically structured and stereotyped. As ‘new presbyter’ had replaced ‘old priest’ – as John Milton so pithily noted – so a Reformed liturgy had replaced the Roman tradition. Even so, it continued stylised, stultified, prescribed and institutional. Gains there were; beyond question, there were gains. Nevertheless... as Samuel Mather noted: ‘The Reforming Churches, flying from Rome, carried, some of them less, all of them something, of Rome with them’.<sup>1</sup> Sadly, the Reformers held on to the Roman medieval principle and practice in church life. With heavy consequences.

What do I mean? How can I make good such a claim? The truth is, the mainstream Reformers, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, among others, like Rome, were all steeped in this mistaken application of the Old Testament to the church. One of the outcomes – just one of the outcomes – of going back to Moses, and trying to impose the Old Testament on the church, is the notion that true religion should be enforced upon the people by the State. Thus the Reformers believed that the magistrate (the State) has the right and duty to enforce true religion upon its citizens. This is why the Reformers are known as ‘magisterial’. They wanted the magistrate to enforce true religion. The end results were, and are, appalling. Many Reformed people still hold to the disastrous idea. There it stands in the Westminster documents.<sup>2</sup> I wonder, for instance, how many

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<sup>1</sup> Mather p149; Andrews p478.

<sup>2</sup> I understand that some of the Reformed have renounced this, but most Reformed people seem to regard any adjustment to the Westminster documents as tantamount to committing the unforgivable sin, and will have no truck with it.

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would like the UK government to put a stop to the building of mosques? Those who badger the government to take such a step are playing with fire. For a start, such laws passed today against, say, Islam, may well be used tomorrow against Christians. In any case, there is no New Testament warrant for the practice. The radicals of the Reformation – the Anabaptists – quite rightly, vehemently disagreed with the magisterial Reformers over the attempt to enforce true religion by the State.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the Reformers and their spiritual children by and large did not throw off the *essence* of Popery as far as church government and care is concerned. True, they spoke of the priesthood of all believers, but, as I have just pointed out, this was largely confined to individual salvation in opposition to sacerdotal priestcraft, but with little reference to corporate church life – apart from setting up a Reformed institution instead of Roman. What is more, just as reaction against the Anabaptists caused the Reformers to go wildly astray on baptism, so their reaction to Rome coloured their view of the priesthood of all believers. And this came at large and lasting cost. The vast majority of Reformed and evangelical churches have been embroiled – bogged down – in these consequences ever since. They are still with us.

Just one instance. How few of us read the letters of the New Testament as letters to the people as a body, to the people as a whole? I get the impression – I may be wrong – do we not nearly always read them as letters to *me* as an individual? I am not saying we should not do the latter. Of course not. But what about the former? Were not the vast majority of the New Testament letters written to *churches*, not to individuals? I have to confess that having to think about these penetrating questions has found me wanting.<sup>4</sup>

Now for a sketch of the history of these events. On occasion, I will have to use terms which I will later explain in detail.

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<sup>3</sup> See the extract just quoted from Franck, and my *Battle*.

<sup>4</sup> Note the plurals in the commands and exhortations in Ephesians. Hendriksen helpfully distinguished the singular (you, your) from the plural (y o u, y o u r). See Hendriksen: *Ephesians* pp149-286.

## ***Martin Luther***

While Martin Luther, in the main, threw off Popery, he was sadly muddled over church government, and failed to work out its New Testament order. He wanted New Testament results, of course, but failed to see that to get them he had to go back to the New Testament template. Clinging to various Roman customs and forms, he reacted badly against the Anabaptists, whom, underneath, he envied, and remained a thorough-going Erastian, putting the Church under princes and civil magistrates.<sup>5</sup>

The catalogue of his very serious mistakes in this area did not stop there. True, he plumped heavily for the priesthood of all believers, but he did this because he rightly saw it as a bastion against medieval Rome and its sacerdotalism. However, when he said that baptism is the means by which sinners are consecrated to the priesthood of all believers – and not, as the Bible does, saying that saving faith and repentance, leading to union with Christ, are the way sinners are made members of the universal priesthood – Luther, in steering sharply away from the Scylla of sacerdotalism, came to grief in the Charybdis of sacramentalism. He has dragged millions with him.

Luther also held to ordination to the professional ministry, but he wanted to have his cake and eat it by striving to rid the rite of any thought of sacramentalism.

The fact is, although he argued for the priesthood of all believers, Luther drew back, treating it as little more than a slogan; for the sake of ‘public order’, a few should do the work ‘on behalf of the rest’, he thought, with a bishop in some sort of overall control.

## ***The Anabaptists***

Since they were anything but a homogeneous body, it is not possible to say ‘the Anabaptists did this or that’. Moreover, as with so many others, their positions changed and developed as time passed. But some things are fairly clear.

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<sup>5</sup> He was magisterial, as above.

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The Anabaptists and the magisterial Reformers were at loggerheads over the nature and structure of church life – this being a main bone of contention between them. The Anabaptists, certainly in the early days, by and large rejected both Papist and Reformed division of the church into clergy and laity, even though they did come to recognise shepherds in the local congregation. It was not that they had no clergy; the truth is, they had no laity, since all of them, so to speak, were the clergy. Recognition of ministers was another issue. Since their ministers had already been ‘ordained’ under the papal system, should they submit themselves for ‘re-ordination’? A number of Anabaptists felt the need of this; they could not rid themselves of the notion that without this they would not be ‘proper ministers’. The magisterial Reformers, however, in the main were happy to continue with their ministers as previously ordained by Rome.<sup>6</sup>

But, along with baptism, the heart of the issue between the Anabaptists and the Reformers in this area was the priesthood of all believers. Though both parties accepted the concept, the Anabaptists, at least in the beginning, made it a fundamental of great practical importance, pushing its corporate observance far beyond the institutionalised limits imposed by the Reformers. In the early days, the Anabaptists stressed its fundamental and practical importance, rejecting the notion of hierarchy altogether. In this, they exceeded their warrant, and ended up falling short of the New Testament and Christ’s gift of stated and recognised ministers to his church.<sup>7</sup>

But this phase was short-lived. Within a mere twenty-five years – by the middle of the 16th century – the old ideas began to re-appear, and the Anabaptists then went beyond the New Testament, in that they began to make use of pastor, elder (sometimes called bishop) and deacon, along with a passive laity. This threefold ministry became the Mennonite pattern, and a professional clergy quickly emerged. The old, wrong-headed hierarchy was thus re-established. Nevertheless, Anabaptist congregations chose their

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<sup>6</sup> Compare Calvin’s justification of infant baptism by Rome (see my *Infant*).

<sup>7</sup> Please see above – in ‘The New Testament Pattern of Church Life and Rule’ – for my remarks on the proper and improper use of ‘hierarchy’.

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own leaders, and, in general, professionalism was taboo. And, with their emphasis on the priesthood of all believers, authority resided in the congregation, not the theologians.

### ***William Tyndale***

William Tyndale denied episcopacy. But his greatest contribution to biblical recovery on church governance is, perhaps, to be found in his English translation of the New Testament, even though it met with severe opposition from the powerful in Church and State. Just one example – his use of ‘elder’ was bitterly opposed by those who wanted ‘priest’. It is no accident that, under James I, the authorities wanted, and got, reinstatement of ‘the old ecclesiastical words’ in the AV of 1611. Sad to say, in the seemingly endless debate about the use of the AV, far too few of those who, resolutely upholding what they consider to be its superiority over all other versions, have taken account of its Preface, and the explanation afforded us by the ‘Translators’. For instance:

We have... 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.<sup>8</sup>

Alas, if only the proper words had been used, it would have saved a world of trouble.

### ***The Anglicans***

The Anglicans went to the Fathers, and argued for, got, and have kept, episcopacy, even though it was attacked at the start by mainstream Puritans – both conforming and non-conforming – and has been criticised by many dissenters down the centuries. In recent years, however, this dissenting confrontation with episcopacy has

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<sup>8</sup> *Baptizō* ought not to have been transliterated into ‘to baptise’, but have been translated ‘to dip’. As Tyndale noted, it is not the only casualty by a long way. Such mistranslations and transliterations have caused immense harm in the church. See my *Battle* and my *Infant*. See, for instance, [jesus-lord.com/pref1611.htm](http://jesus-lord.com/pref1611.htm)

virtually died out. Indeed, episcopacy seems to grow in importance as the search for an ecumenical Church gathers pace.<sup>9</sup>

### ***John Calvin***

John Calvin, it has been claimed, has given the fullest and most accurate exposition of the scriptural scheme of church government and ordination.<sup>10</sup> Let us see. I, for one, question it. I cannot see how such a claim can be maintained in light of his own words: ‘We know that every Church has liberty to frame for itself a form of government that is suitable and profitable for it, because the Lord has not prescribed anything definite’.<sup>11</sup> Really?

What did he think of episcopacy? He was not much bothered about it. As long as the bishop was willing to be under Christ, episcopacy did not indicate any superiority of one bishop over the rest. The bishop, said Calvin, was simply a president over the elders. *Just* a president? I ask you!

Pause for a moment. Is such a disgraceful, unbiblical move to be dismissed so lightly? Is it nothing, a mere bagatelle, that a man-made bishop is a *president* of the elders, of a church? A president, indeed. Should we just shrug our shoulders? Surely not. Yet Calvin, knowing full well what this step had led to – the Papacy – adopted the same line of defence as the Fathers for this unscriptural move, saying that men introduced this to suit the need of the times! To this effect, he cited Jerome, even though Jerome himself had tacitly acknowledged the unscriptural nature of the innovation.

Calvin tried to draw the line. Conceding there is no hierarchy in the settled New Testament pattern of church government,<sup>12</sup> he called the notion ‘improper’.<sup>13</sup> Even so, the Fathers, he claimed, in introducing their changes, did not want to set up church government different to God’s word!

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<sup>9</sup> See my *Infant, Baptist Sacramentalism*.

<sup>10</sup> A very big job indeed. The New Testament knows nothing of ‘ordination’ as commonly practised. See below.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.20 Part 1 p352.

<sup>12</sup> See my earlier remarks on the word ‘hierarchy’.

<sup>13</sup> How mild a criticism of something so abhorrent and so contradictory to the mind of God revealed in his word. See the previous note.

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What! How could Calvin say such a staggering thing? After all, he had conceded that the Fathers went beyond Scripture yet, he contended, they were cautious and hardly strayed from it. Really? I cannot comprehend how he could make such a preposterous statement. Allowing that the very first move of the Fathers was not a large step away from Scripture, one step away from Scripture – however small – is one step too many. What is more, look where these small steps ended up. Read again the decrees of the (pre-Calvin) 1438-39 Council of Florence and the (post-Calvin) 1870 Vatican Council. Besides which, Calvin contradicted himself – was the bishop greater in dignity or not? He spoke against hierarchy in the abstract, but was sympathetic – to put it no stronger – to a system which was riddled with the abominable notion. I ask again: How could Calvin adopt such a grossly unbiblical system? Did Mather – with his: ‘The Reforming Churches, flying from Rome, carried, some of them less, all of them something, of Rome with them’ – not hit the nail squarely on the head in Calvin’s case? Didn’t Calvin prove it when, evolving his own scheme of church government, instead of going back to Scripture, he retained essential features of practices introduced by the Fathers, practices which had been later encapsulated in the papal system? Had Calvin not witnessed the blossoming *and harvest* of such pernicious weeds in the Roman Church?

Coming to his own ideas, Calvin proposed a fourfold order of ministers; pastors – whom he reckoned to correspond to apostles<sup>14</sup> – to discipline, administer the so-called sacraments, admonish and exhort; doctors or teachers to interpret Scripture and catechise; elders to rule the congregation; and deacons to look after the material concerns of the church. He not only distinguished between these ministerial orders as to their duties, but he also made a radical – and unjustified – distinction between these officers as to their appointment; while the pastors and doctors are normally elected by the pastors and elders of *other* congregations, the deacons and elders are elected by the individual congregations concerned. This unwarranted distinction carried sinister overtones. As did his division of the church into clergy (even though he conceded the

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<sup>14</sup> Note the link with the thinking of the Fathers. This link between ‘pastor’ and ‘apostle’ plagues the system still.



idea is ‘improper’) and laity; only ministers are clergy; ruling elders and all other church members are not. Calvin also vested church power upwards through various committees (synods) to an overall General Assembly.

Calvin’s fundamental problem was that he never threw off the medieval Roman view of the Church. Oh, he spoke of the priesthood of all believers, yes,<sup>15</sup> but it was, for him, largely an individual, private matter. In his view, it played little or no part in the corporate life of the church, except to justify the laity’s participation in a structured Reformed liturgy. As a result, in its place, he emphasised the institution of the church, its officers and structure. Take his famous dictum:

Wherever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the ordinances [Calvin had sacraments] administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubt that the Church of God has some existence.<sup>16</sup>

Apart from ‘sacraments’, I am not saying I quarrel with this – but it is what Calvin fails to say that is vital. What about the members? Aren’t the members the living parts of the body, the living stones of the building, and so on? Of course, Calvin, with his unbiblical view of a mixed regenerate-and-unregenerate church membership – based on a misunderstanding of the parable of the wheat and tares, coupled with infant baptism – was bound to flounder here. Indeed, given his unscriptural approach to the subject, he was bound to *founder* on the issue.

But this is the point. Calvin did not appreciate how far-reaching the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is. It is not merely the icing on the cake. It is an essential ingredient of the cake itself. The illustration breaks down. The priesthood of all believers is one of the leading fundamentals of church life. Calvin missed this point entirely, with grievous results. The index to my copy of his *Institutes* – Calvin’s primary source book according to his own words – has no entry whatsoever for the priesthood of all believers – an amazing omission. I realise that Calvin was not responsible for the index, of course, but the fact remains that his editors did not

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<sup>15</sup> Calvin: *Institutes* Vol.1 p432.

<sup>16</sup> Calvin: *Institutes* Vol.2 p289.

discover sufficient emphasis on the subject within Calvin's more than 1300 pages to merit such an entry. This can be accounted for only by his dependence on the legacy from the medieval Roman Church, and by his blind and obsessive prejudice against the Anabaptists. One of those consequences was the formation of a new priesthood – the Reformed clergy – over a new institution – the Reformed Church, with its Reformed liturgy.<sup>17</sup>

### ***The Presbyterians***

Calvin's ideas on church government have greatly influenced succeeding generations of Presbyterians, especially through the Westminster documents. Thus Presbyterians divide the church into clergy and laity; only ministers are clergy; ruling elders and all other church members are not. They also further distinguish between teaching and ruling elders – both in rank and ordination; the teaching elder is more important than the ruling elder; teaching elders are ordained by other ministers, but ruling elders are ordained by the local congregation. Furthermore, both preaching and the administration of the so-called sacraments are the jurisdiction of the teaching elder. He presides; he is superior in rank; he is the minister of the church; he is a member of the clergy; the members are laity. Like Calvin, Presbyterians also distinguish between doctors and pastors, the doctors 'working in the schools'. Some leading Presbyterians have admitted the unworkability – let alone the wrongness – of their system, warning that the neglect of biblical principle has introduced carnal hierarchy – which in itself has grievously marred the witness of the gospel.

Let me try to probe this distinction Calvin and the Presbyterians make between the pastor, teacher, elder and doctor, these various officers acting as teachers, pastors, and teachers of pastors; all it wants to complete the crazy circle is 'pastors of teachers'. It reminds me more of the Mad Hatter's party from *Alice in Wonderland* than a church based on the New Testament. As one who is not *au fait* with this sort of system from a practical point of view, may I raise what to me seems an important question for those

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<sup>17</sup> See my *Battle; Infant*.

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who hold to the idea of a president of the church? It is this: If teachers ‘preside over the education of pastors’, as we are told by advocates of this system, who is the president of the church, after all? The pastor is the president of the church, yet the teachers preside over them in their education.

I am not making all this up. The Westminster documents are clear, locating the main difference between a pastor and a teacher (or doctor) in the teacher’s ability ‘to excel in exposition of Scripture... [rather] than... in application’. This is a ridiculous division in practice – is a man really expected to expound Scripture but not apply it? Just expound it? Is such a practice, even if it was workable, thought to be commendable? I should not care to sit under a man who expounded Scripture but did not apply it. Exposition in itself is fruitless; the whole point of opening the Scripture is to apply it. As the seminal Puritan, William Perkins, wanted people to ask of preaching: ‘What’s the use of it?’ In other words: ‘What’s the application?’<sup>18</sup>

Proceeding with the Westminster documents: The teacher, it would seem, has his work ‘in schools and universities’, whereas the pastor moderates in the proceedings of the officers; only pastors have the power to carry out the laying on of hands, and to ordain. This was Calvin’s view. Where is the New Testament evidence for it? There is absolutely none; none whatsoever. My question remains: Who, in this system, *is* the president of the church, after all?

In short, the idea that a pastor and a teacher are different is not based on Scripture, and history proves it to be unworkable. And as for dividing elders into those who teach and those who rule, the practical headaches of such a system are severe. Get in a good supply of spiritual anti-cephalgias is the best advice I can offer anybody who is thinking of going in for the system.

Finally, the point about the kind of hierarchy we are concerned with here must be pressed further, and must be applied right across the board. Hierarchy in the church is an abominable notion, introduced by the Fathers. It does not come from Scripture. It should be pole-axed. Included in this is the entitling of a man as a

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<sup>18</sup> See my *Battle*. See also my forthcoming book on Sandemanianism.

‘pastor’ to distinguish him from other elders or to mark him out from ordinary (lay) members. And as such it needs to be said to Presbyterians, Independents, Baptists, or whoever else is guilty of the obnoxious practice. Plurality, the New Testament position, demands parity. Parity requires plurality. Once this principle goes, however subtle the changes, the people of God are on the high road to presidency, and all that that entails.

And, of course, the Presbyterians maintained ordination, with the laying on of hands, carried out by previously ordained men. Indeed, the Westminster Assembly in 1645 produced *The Form of Presbyterian Church Government and of Ordination of Ministers*. This document, which still stands as one of the standards of the Presbyterian Church, is emphatic on the matter.

### ***The ‘Sects’ in the Commonwealth***

We are talking about the time between the execution of Charles I and the reign of his son, Charles II. Taking advantage of their new-found liberty, the proliferating dissenters – the ‘Sects’, as they were dismissively labelled by the authorities – were taught by a multitude of ‘mechanic preachers’; in Church terms, ‘lay preachers’. Despite such a sneering, dismissive appellation, this freedom, in fact, had far more in common with the New Testament priesthood of all believers, than did the institutionalised State Church, Reformed or otherwise, of the time. The rigid Church authorities hated and derided the sectaries and their preachers. They did more than deride them. After the Restoration, in 1664, and twice in 1665, Parliament passed laws forbidding lay preaching. The authorities were afraid that if ordination was allowed to wither, any Tom, Dick or Harry (or Sally!) might get into a pulpit, or stand on a tub, and preach. Perish the thought! Cromwell, as usual, rose to the measure of events. Liberty was the issue. Keep the law out of religion. If they can find those who want to hear them, let the ‘mechanics’ preach, and let the people attend them! Within a few very wide limits, Cromwell got his way. For all their excesses, a good job too, one might think, bearing in mind that the kettle-mender, John Bunyan, was one such ‘mechanic preacher’.

### ***The Separatists***

The Separatists, who suffered under the professional clergy in league with the State Church, whether Anglican or Presbyterian, saw ordination as a badge and shield of the privileged, the clergy in particular. As a result, Separatist thinking and practice made a further contribution to anti-clericalism.

Henry Barrow rightly argued for spiritual participation by all the members of the church, all to edify one another in love, in exhortation, reproof and comfort. But, he said, this does not preclude officers in the church including pastors, teachers, governors or rulers, deacons and relievers of widows. Appointment to one of these offices in his fivefold system was by the election of the church members. But Barrow's attempt to distinguish between the pastor and the doctor, like Calvin's, proved unworkable.

### ***The Independents***

The handful of Independents at the overwhelmingly Presbyterian Westminster Assembly in the 1640s did not go along with presbyterial ordination. In addition, whereas the Presbyterians recognised episcopal ordination, the Independents would not.

John Owen, the most able exponent of the Independent system of church government and care, began in the right way by denouncing the corruptions introduced by the Fathers.

As for the priesthood of all believers, Owen rightly dismissed the notion that 'ministers' are sacrificing 'priests', this having been invented by the Fathers. All believers are priests, he properly observed, as members of Christ, being united to him, our great high priest, the Lord Christ. He spoke of the access all believers have to God, their unction, their sacrifices of prayer, good works, self-denial, all, of course, as members of the universal priesthood, the priesthood of all believers.<sup>19</sup> Very good as far as it went, but still not reaching the full New Testament expression of that doctrine.

When he came to the stated ministry and rule of the church, despite his honest analysis of the situation, Owen – like Calvin – was sympathetic to the early deviations adopted by the Fathers, was

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<sup>19</sup> Owen: *Duty of Pastors and People* pp19-25.

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tolerant of the idea of ‘presidency’, and – again like Calvin – tried to keep this unscriptural notion in bounds by saying that this presidency involved no new order, power or authority. Really! As I have shown, history is against Owen; as I will show, contemporary church life is against him; above all, the Bible is against him, as he himself had to admit. The best scriptural defence he could offer was vaguely to suggest that Peter, it ‘seems’, was president among the apostles. I ask you! True, ‘impetuous’ Peter was often the first to plunge into the unknown, and first to speak – or blurt out – but I see no suggestion that he was ‘president’. Some might argue for James!<sup>20</sup>

Yet, on occasion, Owen could argue for the biblical twofold order, but, by making subtle distinctions, he ended up with a three- or fourfold order – just as the Fathers and Calvin. Owen, again like Calvin, divided the elders into two – teachers and rulers; the teaching elders he called pastors and teachers. He went further and differentiated between the pastor and the teacher, but the difference was ‘in degree, but not in order’. I confess I do not understand this distinction; nor, I suspect, do most church members – in those churches where Owen’s system and logic applies. I am not saying that men may not have different skills, weaknesses and strengths, but it is the making of two distinct officers, based upon ‘degree but not order’, which is to me not only incomprehensible but objectionable. Furthermore, why stop at two?

And not only that. The overwhelming majority of Christians, it seems to me, really do think pastors are more important than elders or teachers (if they exist). After all, the pastor can do things – important things – which no other person in the church can do. What does that mean, if it does not mean he is more important, more special, than everybody else?

The upshot of Owen’s distinctions was to produce a fourfold order, with the pastor as ‘the first officer or elder of the church’, even though Owen had said he didn’t like the idea of hierarchy! He admitted there is no scriptural difference between bishops and elders, but, to avoid dissension, he fell back upon the invention of

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<sup>20</sup> See Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 2:9,12. And this last raises some interesting questions, which I have to leave until I bring out my book on the law.

the Fathers and came out for a single pastor assisted by elders,<sup>21</sup> even though he also explored the question as to whether there should be one or more pastors in a church.

Owen did not appear to mind the clergy/laity split. What is more, in an obscure passage, he seemed to distinguish between an ‘uncalled’ or ‘private Christian’ – by which he meant *non-ordained* – and ‘the minister’. As far as I have been able to unravel him, Owen was allowing that an ‘ordinary’ Christian might ‘preach’ Scripture in unusual circumstances (as ‘a charitable act’), but only a minister (an *ordained* man, a professional expert) can give the authoritative interpretation of Scripture. Indeed, Owen said that only a minister can ‘open’ (explain) the Scripture; the ordinary believer can apply it – once, I presume, he has swallowed what the minister has spelled out to him as the official ‘kosher’ line of biblical interpretation. In other words, there is a big difference between a clergyman and a layman when it comes to preaching, opening and interpreting the word of God.

If I have read Owen aright, he ended up in an obviously unscriptural cul-de-sac. How does it square with Acts 17:11? And what happens when two clergymen don’t agree? Furthermore, allowing, as I have, that not all believers are capable of sustaining a public teaching ministry, and that Christ instituted the stated and recognised rulers and teachers in his church, how does Owen’s dictum match the many New Testament passages which so clearly teach that every believer is competent, by the Spirit, to edify another? More, that every believer is expected and privileged to edify his fellow-believers?

### ***The Baptists***

At the end of the opening decade of the 17th century, Thomas Helwys separated from John Smyth, left Holland and, brought the General Baptist church back to England. Helwys, rejecting Smyth’s view on the ministry, argued that it is not right to restrict the ministry to a certain class of men, in effect turning them into ‘the

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<sup>21</sup> John Robinson had been nearer the mark: ‘That flock that has two shepherds is not endangered, but secured by it’.

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ordained', 'the clergy'. Helwys pointed out that Smyth, with his views, was virtually falling back into apostolic succession.

But things did not stay still. During the years 1650-1750, the General Baptists went back to ordination with the laying on of hands, and developed a threefold ministerial order – bishops or messengers, elders or pastors, and deacons. The messenger, who approximated to an apostle, was an itinerant officer with power to ordain pastors. Later, as denominational ideas developed through Associations and Unions, a sense of ministerial hierarchy evolved. This, in turn, led some General Baptist churches in the 20th century to cede their Christ-given powers upwards to their Association or Union. These latter bodies then handed over their powers to a National Assembly.

The 1644 Particular Baptist Confession was non-ordination. It did not mention ordination in connection with office, and it expressly stated that baptism can be carried out by any 'preaching disciple, it being nowhere tied to a particular church, officer or person extraordinarily sent'. With the Restoration, however, and with the (it was felt) necessity of showing a common front with other dissenters, the Particular Baptists drew up their 1677 (1688/9) Confession. Because of the supposed necessity just mentioned, this Confession drew heavily on the Presbyterian Westminster Confession, and ordination was thus established among the Particular Baptists, including the laying on of hands, though 'lay preaching' was allowed.

The Particular Baptist, John Gill (1697-1771), very strongly opposed 'ordination' (even though he used the word!) and the laying on of hands, rightly arguing that sacramentalism is inevitably bound up with both. Sadly, his scriptural arguments went largely unheeded. Tradition – the love of it – triumphed. It always is the default position.

Many Particular Baptists (including Gill) adopted the scheme of one pastor and several deacons. Take Andrew Fuller. (Fuller, incidentally, argued for ordination, and restricted the administration of the Lord's supper to an ordained minister, unless the circumstances were extraordinary). On 'the pastor', however, he started in the right way, by castigating churches who have a plurality of elders in name but not in reality. But unfortunately he



threw the baby out with the bath water. Conforming to the common practice, Fuller distinguished between ministers and elders, and without any scriptural justification adopted the title ‘pastor’ for a bishop. He conceded that large churches might need more than one pastor – but he thought it all a question of size; no biblical principle is involved, apparently. In reality a single pastor ought ‘to preside’, this pastor being the sole ruler of the church. Fuller, it seems, was simply not able to conceive of a pastor except in terms of an ordained minister, a professional clergyman. He tried to draw back, deploring a minister talking about ‘*my church, my deacons*’, but it was a case of shutting the stable door far too late.

It seems impossible to shake this notion of ‘presidency’. It must be very deeply ingrained in fallen man. It comes up everywhere. We want a king, said Israel. We must have a king. And so say all of us, it seems. Or nearly all of us!

Let me take up this point about the pastor and *his* people, about which Fuller expressed himself so vehemently, even though he was condemning himself in the process. After all, Fuller himself called church members the pastor’s people! This kind of language is practically universal today. How frequently ‘the pastor’ speaks of the church as ‘my people’, a virtual blasphemy. Why do I say that? Because the people of God are *God’s* people. This would seem self-evident. The saints are a people for God’s name, for him (Acts 15:14; 2 Cor. 6:16; Heb. 4:9; 8:10; 1 Pet. 2:10; Rev. 18:4; 21:3); they are his elect (Rom. 11:1-2); converts are people who are added to the Lord (Acts 11:24), they are his, they belong to him (Acts 18:10). See also Romans 9:25,26. They are *never* called the pastor’s people; they are *never* addressed in that way – in the Bible, I mean.

In 1854, the Gospel Standard Strict Baptist, J.C.Philpot, hit the nail squarely on the head. He was writing against what he called ‘the carnal priesthood... priestly domination’, which he defined as ‘tyranny’ or ‘priestly power’, ‘sacerdotal authority’. He was, of course, speaking of Rome and ‘Puseyism’, but did not leave it there. Dissenters, and even many Particular Baptists, he said, are guilty of recognising a ‘religious freemasonry, a clerical brotherhood’ with ‘priestly power’. They certainly do!<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Philpot: *Reviews* Vol.1 pp321-324. But a little rich, this, considering the veneration afforded Philpot by Gospel Standard Strict Baptists – see my

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C.H.Spurgeon (and his brother J.A.) held to the traditional threefold order and hierarchy in church care and government. Although he was one of two pastors at the Metropolitan Tabernacle at the time, even so C.H.Spurgeon thought in terms of the single pastor who is the presiding elder, the ruler of the church.

In the past fifty years, it is true, there has been a recovery of the biblical principle of the plurality of elders among Reformed Baptist churches. At least, in name and theory. Sad to say – very sad to say – too often this kind of talk has been in name only. The biblical principle and its corollaries have not always been understood and worked out in practice.

Not only so. A plurality/equality of elders has been resisted by some leading Reformed Baptists. Men such as Peter Masters, David Fountain and Nigel Lacey have strongly advocated the popular but non-biblical threefold system, although disagreeing over details.<sup>23</sup> Of course, in their writings they have struggled to avoid ‘elitism’ and cultivation of ‘VIPism’; but they have struggled in vain. When the equality of eldership is dismissed as ‘novel’; when ‘the pastor’ is called ‘the permanent president’; when pastors are ‘senior men... elders of a unique kind... *specialists* in Bible teaching’, while non-pastors are “‘lay” elders’ who carry out their duties only under ‘the chairmanship... of their pastor’; and when such claims are illustrated by army ranks – the field officer (the pastor), the subaltern (the ruling elder) and the private (the ordinary church member) – of course it is vain to try to keep out elitism or hierarchy. Yet those of us who will not go along with all this are castigated, and castigated by those who *are* prepared to exceed Scripture, and prepared to go to the Fathers and their inventions for church order. The boot is on the other foot.

Why this clamour for a ‘permanent president’? It is not unknown for such ‘presidents’ to ‘boast’ that nothing happens – nothing is even raised – in ‘their’ (note the word) church, without their say-so. And this is regarded as a sure indication of the orthodoxy and order of ‘their’ church. It is nothing of the sort, of

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*Septimus Sears* and my forthcoming book on *Sears, the Gospel Standard* and eternal justification.

<sup>23</sup> Not all three agree with every aspect of what immediately follows, but it is, I believe, a fair representation of their position. See ‘Extracts’.

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course. It is a sure mark of a low-level popish Stasi. Of course, certain issues can only be raised and discussed in private; not everything can be discussed in an open public meeting – but such issues are exceptional. On the agenda of the business meeting – assuming there is an agenda and there is a business meeting at which to have an agenda – is there a section called ‘Any Other Business’? If not, why not? If there is, how do things get raised at that time? Even more important, how are things prevented from being raised in public, and what happens to those issues? I merely ask the questions...

### ***The Brethren***

Anthony Norris Groves (1795-1853), who, while preparing to become an Anglican priest, realised he could not be ordained, since this would mean giving sanction to military service. Rejected – because of his lack of ordination – by the Church Missionary Society, he came to the conclusion that ordination was not necessary for a real minister of God. John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) was ordained deacon (1825), then priest (1826) in the established Church of Ireland, but in 1828 resigned his position as curate. The Brethren movement soon split into two main factions – Exclusive and Open. The former recognised no elders or deacons at all, but quickly fell into more and more splinter groups, showing staggering signs of authoritarianism. So much so, the most notorious of all the Brethren groups today has a form of popery second-to-none. The Open Brethren recognised the rightness of eldership and structure, and although there has been a degeneration this past 100 years – in company with nearly all evangelical groups – the Open Brethren have, in their diversity, made large contributions to the advance of the gospel.

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This then, in brief, and, I am afraid, somewhat simplistically, is a glance at the way that, although the Reformed churches have rejected the grosser perversions of the Papacy, many (most) have not shaken themselves free of the basic corruptions of church order

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and rule introduced by the Fathers. Sad to say, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Independents and Baptists are all guilty.<sup>24</sup>

How has this happened? What is the root of the problem? We have glanced at history, tradition, common practice. Very good and proper in its way. But the crux of the matter is that many – most – believers have taken biblical words and misused them – abused them – with disastrous consequences. Scripture is what counts. Scripture gives us the words we must use. And Scripture must define the meanings of those words. Not history; not theologians; not tradition. We must base our practice on *Scripture – its words and what it means by them*. Remember Humpty Dumpty!

There are four words which we must look at. The words I have in mind are *pastor*, *minister*, *clergy* and *ordain*. Comparing what is commonly thought of today when these words are used – comparing that, I say, with what Scripture intends by these words, will take us to the heart of the problem. And, having got to that, if we can return to the New Testament on these things, the gain would be immense.

Let me sum up so far. As Frank A. Viola put it:

Church history is rife with examples demonstrating how virtually every past renewal has been hampered because the new wine has been routinely re-packaged into old wineskins. By the old wineskins, I mean those traditional church structures that are patterned after the old Judaic religious system – a system which separated God's people into two separate classes, required the presence of human mediators, erected sacred buildings, and laid stress on outward forms. The facets of the old wineskins are many: the clergy/laity distinction, the spectator-performer styled church meeting, the single-pastor system... the passive [universal] priesthood... All of these facets represent old covenant forms in New Testament garb.<sup>25</sup>

What are the essential characteristics of this departure from the pattern set up by Christ? First of all, the New Testament priesthood of all believers has been forgotten or treated as a mere slogan. The

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<sup>24</sup> I fully acknowledge that a growing number of individuals and churches are thinking about these matters, and trying to change. My experience, however, is largely among traditional churches where things, it seems to me, are much as I have described.

<sup>25</sup> Viola: *Rethinking* p5.

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New Testament emphasis upon ‘participation’ has been replaced by the notion of ‘passivity’. And this has allowed three things to take centre stage:

1. The churches elevate a man, set him apart from other believers, set him apart from and above other elders, and afford him a dignity, honour, title and status far beyond New Testament warrant. ‘President’, as I have observed, seems to be the key word or underlying ethos, even when the word itself is not used.
2. Thus the churches adopt a threefold order of officers instead of the biblical twofold order.
3. The churches divide believers into two – clergy and laity.

Or, of course, chicken and egg, the invention of the clergy/laity split has led to passivity. But, whichever way it is, it has all come about because Christians down the centuries – and even to this day – have repeated one of the basic errors of the Fathers. That is to say, they have taken New Testament words – four in particular – *pastor*, *minister*, *clergy* and *ordain* – adjusted their meanings, and thus taken them far beyond the New Testament.

It is time to look at what the New Testament means by these four words, and probe the way that they have been abused. It should be enlightening. ‘Frightening’ might be a more appropriate word!