

## MAJOR BIBLE DOCTRINES

### Part 42: The Church: its government

The church's government is important, and must be regulated by the teaching of Scripture. "Scripture itself is not a book of church order, but it does contain the principles of church government that cannot be disregarded without injury to the spiritual life" (Bavinck).

Government is indispensable for the church as a gathering of believers. Just as a temple calls for an architect, a field a sower, a vineyard a keeper, a net a fisherman, a flock a shepherd, a body a head, a family a father, a kingdom a king, so also the church is unthinkable without an authority that sustains, guides, cares for, and protects it—Herman Bavinck [*Reformed Dogmatics*, vol.4, 329]

Jesus Christ, as King and Head of his church, has given to his people all the oracles, ordinances, and officers necessary for their edification and maturation in this world. In his messianic office as King, from his throne of glory he rules and teaches his people by his Word and Spirit through the ministry of these designated officers. Moreover, he has ordained for his church, in order that all things might be done decently and in order, a system of government, the details of which are either expressly set forth in Scripture or deducible from it by good and necessary inference—Robert Reymond [*Systematic Theology*, 895-896]

#### I. The Church

##### A. Three facts about church government

1. *Christ rules His church.* "Christ is the Head of the Church and the source of all its authority" (Berkhof). He rules in reward to His sufferings.<sup>1</sup> "He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church" (Eph.1:22). "The Bible is very clear that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the church. He is in ultimate charge of the universal church, but he is also the Head of every local assembly" (Crotts). In this sense, "the church, under the new covenant as well as under the old, is a theocracy. *The Lord is its judge, lawgiver, and king* (Isa.33:22)" (Bavinck). Though Christ is the sole Head of the church, "Christ exercises his headship through his appointed representatives on earth" (Waldron). "It is evident from the direct relation of each member of the church, and so of the church as a whole, to Christ as sovereign and lawgiver, that the government of the church, so far as regards the source of authority, is an absolute monarchy" (Strong). "The form of government instituted by Christ for his churches, is, a Christocracy. By this term I mean that form of government of which Christ is the *head*, and under which he requires his people to receive *all* their principles of actions from, and to frame *all* their doings according to, his laws and precepts contained in the Bible. He is their prophet and their king, and his dominion over them is absolute, for they are not their own, but belong to Him" (Johnson). [1] He rules through His Spirit. "The Holy Spirit is the Vicar of Christ" (Waldron). Thus, Christ Himself, by His Spirit, personally rules in the midst of His church. "Through the Spirit, Christ guides his church in its service. The rule of Christ through his Word and Spirit is not the dead hand of human tradition reaching from the past. Rather, by his living truth and the abiding presence of his Spirit the Lord governs, guides and refreshes his people" (Clowney). [2] He rules through His word. "The primary means Jesus uses to rule his church is the

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Christ's perfect obedience, God has granted the Mediator the right and the power to gather his people together out of the world, to protect them against all their enemies, and to completely subdue those enemies themselves. God so rules the world that Christ may ask for the Gentile nations as his inheritance and the ends of the earth as his possession (Ps.2:8). In the event of Christ's exaltation, the Father recognized his Son and appointed him as the heir of all things (Heb.1:2)—Herman Bavinck [*Reformed Dogmatics*, vol.4, 371]

Bible" (Crotts). This word was given through the apostles, who spoke the word of Christ. "Not just the Jewish-Christian church but also the entire NT church rests on the foundation of apostles and prophets and shares in fellowship with Christ by the word of the apostles" (Bavinck). "The law of the church is simply the will of Christ, as expressed in the Scripture and interpreted by the Holy Spirit" (Strong). [3] He rules through His under-shepherds. Elders, or Bishops, possess an authority bestowed upon them by Christ Himself. This authority is positional, spiritual, and local. [a] Positional. It's an authority invested in the office of elder and not native to the person in that office. Thus authority is entrusted to the eldership as a stewardship, for which they will be held accountable. "All government in the church is *stewardship*; i.e. its leaders are servant-managers, who use their authority only to advance the interests of those they represent and serve" (Clowney). [b] Spiritual. "Because Christ's saving kingdom is spiritual, not temporal, the power given to the church must also be spiritual. The government of the church cannot use political sanctions or physical force" (Clowney). "Rule within the church must correspond to the spiritual nature of Christ's kingdom. Jesus said, *My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight* (Jn.18:36). The nature of the kingdom determines the nature of its leadership" (Watts). [c] Local. "No elder, or bishop, has any responsibility in that capacity outside his own local church" (Good). "These leaders, who are variously called elders, overseers, or teachers, exercise only a local and fallible authority in the particular church where they are. In those churches, however, they do exercise Christ's authority and rule over his church" (Waldron).

The Lord Jesus Christ is the head of the church, in whom, by the appointment of the Father, all power for the calling, institution, order or government of the church, is invested in a supreme and sovereign manner; neither 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; whom the Lord shall destroy with the brightness of his coming—LBC [26:4]

Christ has, therefore, given his church a government of its own. He himself called, equipped, and ordained the apostles, who are the foundation of the church. And these apostles in turn, under his guidance, instituted the ordinary offices of overseers and deacons, in order that the churches of Christ would not be deprived of government in their absence and after their deaths. Also these ordinary offices have their origin in God and did not end in the apostolic era but were instituted so that they should remain to the end of this dispensation—Herman Bavinck [*Reformed Dogmatics*, vol.4, 370]

(1) Isa.9:6-7; Col.1:18; Heb.13:7, 17; 1Pet.2:4-8

2. *Christ has given local autonomy and authority to local churches.* There are basically three forms of church government: Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Congregational. Episcopalians give the authority to archbishops who govern bishops, who oversee multiple churches. Presbyterians give the authority to Presbyteries comprised of elders from each local church. Congregationalists give the authority to local churches, governed by a plurality of elders. Local autonomy (self-rule) refers to the ability of local churches to govern themselves under the authority of Christ and His word. "Each church, as a distinct organization, was independent of every other church. No intimation is anywhere given that the acts of one church were supervised by another church, or by any ecclesiastical judicatory established by a combination of churches" (Dagg). "Every local church is a complete church of Christ, fully equipped with everything that is required for its government. It has absolutely no need of it that any government should be imposed upon it from without. And not only that, but such an imposition would be absolutely contrary to its nature" (Berkhof). "The Churches organized by the apostles were all distinct, independent bodies. Each church managed its own affairs, independently of every other, recognizing no human control or authority outside of itself" (Williams).

[1] Local churches recognize their own officers.<sup>2</sup> The qualifications for officers are given to each local church to recognize and ordain elders and deacons. Accordingly, the church at Antioch recognized and ordained Barnabas and Saul as missionaries (Acts 13:1-4), and the church in Jerusalem chose its own deacons, "seek out from among you seven men of good reputation" (Acts 6:3). "The appointment of elders and deacons is the prerogative of the Lord Jesus Christ alone. However, he has ordained that each local church exercise the responsibility of recognizing those whom He is appointing to be elders and deacons in that particular church" (Church Constitution). "Whatever the office may be (elder, deacon), it is the local church which actually makes the choice. No outside authority may dictate who must be placed in office" (Good). [2] Local churches regulate their own membership. "By virtue of the charter and power which Christ has given to his church, his spiritual corporation, they are enabled to receive members in, and to exclude unworthy members as occasion may require, as may appear by divers examples (Rom.14:1; Acts 2:41; 1Cor.5:4-5; Matt.18:18; 2Thess.2:6, 14)" (Griffith). [3] Local churches exercise their own discipline.<sup>3</sup> "The power of discipline has been delivered to each local church, as we learn in the gospels was true of the synagogue (Jn.9:22, 35; 16:2). Christ provided practical guidelines about what to do if someone commits an offence and then refuses to discuss it: *'If he shall neglect to hear them, tell it to the church'* (Matt.18:17). Here, *'the church'* must refer to a particular, local company of believers" (Watts). [4] Local churches judge their own affairs. "Many activities may be observed in the NT, all of which fall within the jurisdiction of the local church. For example, the Church administers its own finances (Acts 4:34-35; 5:1-11; 11:29; 1Cor.16:1-3), and controls its own public meetings (1Cor.14:23-40)" (Good). Furthermore, the church judges or settles internal controversy and disagreement. "Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints" (1Cor.6:1). [5] Local churches administer their own sacraments. "Both baptism and the Lord's Table are church ordinances and should not be observed on any other basis" (Good). "A church thus constituted has the keys, or power of government, within itself, having Christ for its head, and his law for its rule. It has the power and privilege of choosing its own officers (Acts 6:3; 13:2), exercising its own discipline (Matt.18:17), and administering the Word and ordinances, for the edification and comfort of its members (Acts 2:46)" (Charleston Association, 1774).

To each of these churches thus gathered, according to his mind declared in his Word, he has given all that power and authority, which is in any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which he has instituted for them to observe; with commands and rules for the due and right exerting and executing of that power—LBC [26:7]

Baptists insist upon that form of government under which each local church is entirely autonomous. As such, the individual, organized assembly is independent of outside

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<sup>2</sup> Every particular congregational church incorporated by and according to the institution of Christ in the Gospel, and duly organized according to the pattern of the primitive churches, has sufficient power from Christ to call and ordain its own officers; so that no man, or set of men, have authority to choose officers for them, or impose any officers on them, without their previous knowledge and voluntary consent. Deacons are to be chosen by the multitude (Acts 6:3). Elders were ordained in every church by election or suffrage of the church (Acts 14:23); and every particular church, as such, assembled with her proper elders, has sufficient power to receive members (Acts 2:41; Rom.14:1). And in the exercise of any acts of discipline, such a church being convened with her own officers or elders in the name of Christ, may act according to Gospel rule in any case, even to excommunicate such members as are found to be obstinate in disorders, or heretical in principles, after due admonition, or such as are guilty of gross and scandalous immoralities in conversation, independent on any other church power superior to itself—Benjamin Griffith [*Polity*, 111]

<sup>3</sup> In the letters to the seven churches of Asia in Revelation 2 and 3, the subject of church discipline is repeatedly emphasized by Christ, but each church is held solely responsible for its own members and their discipline. Christ never asserts, assumes, or implies that the other churches may exercise church discipline by intervening in another church's affairs. The entire group is not held responsible or told to act for the discipline of Laodicea—Sam Waldron [*Exposition*, 319]

control by any other human agency. It is directly responsible to Jesus Christ alone. This independency of ecclesiastical government does not eliminate the fellowship and cooperation with other churches of like faith and order, but it guarantees liberty of thought and action with such voluntary participation—Kenneth Good [*God's Blueprint for a Church*, 62]

(1) Matt.18:15-20<sup>4</sup>; 1Cor.5:4-5, 12-13 (2Cor.2:6)

3. *Churches should encourage and promote intra-church fellowship and assistance with like-minded churches.* Though no one church has binding authority over another, nevertheless, there should be close fellowship and communion between churches. [1] Financial assistance. Churches should financially assist each other when able. "For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem" (Rom.15:26; 2Cor.8:1-4, 16-24; 9:12-15). [2] Missionary assistance. Local churches assist missionaries from sister churches both financially and prayerfully. "I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you" (Rom.16:1-2; 3Jn.8-10). [3] Fellowship.<sup>5</sup> "As each church, and all the members of it, are bound to pray continually for the good and prosperity of all the churches of Christ, in all places, and upon all occasions to further it...so the churches, when planted by the providence of God, so as they may enjoy opportunity and advantage for it, ought to hold communion among themselves, for their peace, increase of love, and mutual edification"(LBC). [4] Edification. Though each church is given its own gifts in pastor-teachers, these can be shared through pulpit-exchanges and conferences. "We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith" (1Thess.3:2). [5] Counsel. "In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or administration...it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do, by their messengers, meet to consider and give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned; howbeit these messengers assembled are not entrusted with any church-power properly so called; or with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons; or to impose their determination on the churches of officers" (LBC).

Such references in the NT as '*the churches of Galatia*' (Gal.1:2; 1Cor.16:1), '*the churches of Asia*' (1Cor.16:19; Rev.1:4), and '*the churches of Judaea*' (Gal.1:22) lead us to believe that there was an early practice of fellowshipping together in common causes to a degree which would allow for mutual cooperation without the surrender of local autonomy. Many things may be accomplished for mutual benefit which would not be possible to a single church by itself. Independence does not mean isolation and does not eliminate cooperation—Kenneth Good [*God's Blueprint for a Church*, 69]

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<sup>4</sup> The power of the keys, or to receive in and shut out of the congregation, is committed unto the Church. And that the power of the keys is in the church, appears to me from Matthew 18:17, *If he will not hear the Church*; it is not said, if he will not hear the Elder, or Elders. It also appears in that of the Apostle, in directing the Church to cast out the Incestuous Person (1Cor.5:7); he does not give this Counsel to the Elder or Elders of the Church, but to the Church. *Purge out the Old Leaven, that you may be a new lump* (1Cor.5:7). So he commands the Church to withdraw from every brother that walks disorderly (2Thess.3:6, 14)—Benjamin Keach [*Polity*, 71]

<sup>5</sup> Churches of the same faith and gospel order, so far as is necessary to communion; as they have all drank into and of one and the same spirit; as they are branches of one and the same body, and hold to one and the same head; and as they have one Lord, one faith, and one baptism: they therefore may, and ought to have and enjoy fellowship and a friendly intercourse together, as occasion may require and opportunity serve, in the discharge of those relative duties, which may tend to the mutual benefit and edification of the whole—Samuel Jones [*Polity*, 157]