

The Government Of The Church (2)

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Exodus 18:13-27

I said last time we visited this passage that my aim was to lay the business of church government before you. Here we see Moses beginning to put things in order and I'd like to use this passage for a week or two to try and explain how I see church government being worked out in biblical terms. It's a very important subject even today albeit a much neglected one. But it's a subject that shouldn't have been neglected.

You may have heard people today say "*Religion's your own personal business, it's a private thing*" but that's absolute nonsense as we are all the image bearers of God and a relationship with God naturally flows out to others. Religion cannot be a purely individual and private thing.

The word '*organic*' is a very, very important biblical concept. It's foundational, Genesis stuff and God deals with us as an organic whole. His earthly creation is an organism. The heavenly one is a separate one but it's a living organism too. No-one can pass from the earthly one to the heavenly one except through the person and the finished work of Jesus Christ. The foundation of the Church is God's election.

The Church is also an organism itself; a living entity. Protestants seem to have lost sight of the fact that it is a divine institution and part of the reason (not all - but part) is the individualism that exists in the minds of people in the world that has also filtered into the Church. It is an extreme that is reflected in an extreme independency that is a cause for lament to even the independents in the Church today. (I'm not alone in this).

The Church is a company of gathered believers - and of course there is a mix as you will see in due course - but it has as its one marker the word of God. It is its only standard and should be confessed in the preaching, in the ordering of the sacraments and in the life of the Church.

The Church needs strong government and it is this that is alluded to in this passage.

"You can't do this alone Moses. You will destroy yourself and you'll destroy the people!"

That is a word that needs to be spoken to every local church *"You can't do this alone! You need the help of others!"* Although it may seem fine and good for the big, well established churches that have large numbers in the congregation and plenty of financial clout, they are not required of God to go it alone either. They are not to just sit back and say *"We're OK"* either.

Last time I said to you that for years and years the problem with our nation has been that we have lacked strong government. We've had an effeminate government that has resulted in a weak, pallid, effeminate nation that is falling apart at the seams. And the church in the nation is just the same as it too lacks strong government.

Strong government is required not just to preserve the Church but to preserve our Reformation doctrines as they are in danger of evaporating. There are many churches at the moment that claim to be evangelical and say they subscribe to Reformed doctrine but who are a million miles away from that. The word 'evangelical' has been emptied of all meaning in our nation.

The Ruler of the Church

The Church is an organism so it produces its own offspring (children, children's children) and, through the proclamation of the gospel, Christ gathers his Church through the Church.

The Reformation avoided two extremes.

1. There was the hierarchy of Rome which demanded everybody under their thumb. *"We tell you what to believe, we tell you what to do, we tell you what the truth is; we interpret the truth for you."* Rome has always been an utterly totalitarian church government. That was one extreme and the Reformation delivered us from it.

2. The other extreme was the wildness of the Anabaptists, some of whom were eventually hung in public for insurrection. Calvin lived in daily fear that if left to their own devices they would destroy the work of the Reformation.

Remember that from the Patriarchs - Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - all the way to the Apostles and on to today, the Church is one Church, an organism. In the eyes of God, who is in eternity not in the world, He only sees one Church. From the beginning to the end it's just one entity, a living organism.

A human being is an organism - right? I am, if you can believe me, a complete, a perfect, entity - I have 2 legs, 2 feet, 2 hands, 2 arms. But if you added another arm I'd no longer be that complete entity. And the Church likewise is a complete, perfect entity. If you were to add one more than all of God's elect to that Church it would not be a perfect complete Church and the same if you subtracted one of the elect from it. The Church is a complete number determined by God from before the foundation of the world - a complete and perfect Church.

Ephesians 2: 20 tells us that the Church is founded on the Apostles and the Prophets and on the Lord Jesus Christ the chief cornerstone. But the only continuation of the Apostles that we have is their confession. In Mathew 16:16 and following, Peter says *Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God* and Jesus replies that on that confession of yours Peter *"I will build my Church"*. The only continuation is the apostolic confession doctrine upon which the Church is built.

When we are looking for a biblical form of government we have to ask ourselves what we base our opinions on. I'm asking you for something very difficult here, I am asking you for absolute ruthlessness with yourselves. Most people base their opinions on the Church that they were saved in, *"This is the church I was saved in so this must be the right form of church government"* *"This is the church I grew up in so this must be the right form of church government."* Very few Christians ever stop to consider whether the way their church is run is the way that God has laid down.

I was an officer in my home church for 14 years. It was that church that sent me into the ministry and sent me here to plant this church. It is Baptist and it is independent. My family, when I was converted, were all Baptists and independent and I held those views myself. At one point I persecuted Presbyterians too. However after searching the Scriptures I've come to a different point of view and I now see things differently. I want the Word of God to be my rule and nothing else and that is all I ask of you. Can you stand here and defend your views on Church government from this book?

Most people subordinate their idea of church government to other things but it is God's plan and He commissions the officers of the church and He commissions the builders. All authority in the Church is Jesus Christ's alone. He is the ultimate ruler. No pope, no president, no prime minister, no queen can usurp that authority - Jesus Christ is the sole authority of the Church and the government is on his

shoulders.

In the Westminster Confession of Faith this is put very clearly in chapter 25 section 6.

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 exalteth himself, in the Church. against Christ and all that is called God

This book - the Bible - and this book alone is His statute book. He commissions the officers who are responsible and accountable. They are to uphold the laws and the censures; they are to implement the government of the Church according to Christ's statute book. *Isaiah 8:20... if they speak not according to this word, then it is because there is no light in them.* Infallibility is found nowhere else than in the Word of God in the Bible and Church matters, whatever they be, must be bought before this standard. His standard not mine, yours or anybody else's.

One of the preachers at the induction service I went to yesterday giving the charge to the pastor who was being inducted reminded him that the day will come when he will stand before God and he will give account for the souls of the people in front of him. It made me tremble. Anyone fancy the job?

You may ask is the Bible enough? Why do we have our constitution underpinned by our confessions as well - do we really need it? These creeds from the past, these confessions, are they still relevant? Isn't the Bible enough?

The Bible is enough - let me be absolutely clear about that. It was a great Reformation war cry - the necessity of Scripture, the sufficiency of Scripture and the perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture.

We still need our subordinate standards (our confessions) though so let me give you 5 reasons why they are needed:

1. They unite our beliefs and mean we are all singing from the same hymn sheet.
2. They testify against error as the errors that these confessions deal with are regurgitated in each and every generation. The heresies that we face and are dealing with today are the heresies of the past.
3. They test dubious interpretations, opinions and practices.
4. They teach fundamental truths concerning the character and being of God.

It's very easy for us today. If I ask you what you believe about the being of God you would say He's one God in 3 persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All 3 are co-equal. Now you'd all subscribe to that and can say it off pat but these doctrines were all hammered out on the anvil of debate, discussion and study in the Early Church during the first 3 centuries of the Church while we've had it handed to us on a plate.

5. They form a bond of united practice amongst us.

But the supreme judge is always Scripture.

Let me say if I may that the way to learn to Scripture is to come through the confessions. Because these confessions have been neglected by so many Christians today, we have many that open their Bibles and read verses and they don't have a clue what they mean or where they fit in and they get nowhere with their reading. We need to come to the Bible with a good knowledge of and a commitment to these confessions or otherwise you are starting from scratch! You'll start with no idea of the truth and end up

understanding nothing of the Christian faith whatsoever.

Now isn't that the Church we have today in this nation? We're full of Christians with the attitude that they don't want these old documents as they mean nothing to us today and they'll do just fine without them. They have the Bible.

That is nothing but pride and arrogance! It has taken the Church 2000 years to get where it is and the man who thinks he can get there himself in his own lifetime is someone worse than proud. To ignore the work of the Church over such periods of time is nothing short of tragic. Pygmies like us in our day and generation have to stand on the shoulders of Calvin and Luther in order to see the foot of the mountain let alone the summit.

So our subordinate standards - our confessions - are necessary BUT (and I put this in inverted commas, in capitals, underscored in red twice) *THE SUPREME JUDGE IS ALWAYS SCRIPTURE - THE ULTIMATE RULER OF THE CHURCH.*

The Rule of the Church

We see moral and financial scandals, pain and rupture in the Church and the question must surely arise in our minds, *does Christ really rule the Church?* And in order to answer that we need to address what the word 'Church' really means and how it is used in the Bible. As everything you and I see and call the Church isn't necessarily the Church.

The New Testament word for Church is a word that is used in 2 ways - ecclesia ('ek' means out of - remember - we've discussed this before). Ekklesia/Ecclesia = a people called out.

Remember God called Abraham to himself out of Ur in the land of the Chaldees and every one of God's people is called out of the world in like fashion. The Church is a called out people, an ecclesia; a body of people in space/time who are truly elect and chosen by God.

This then is the ecclesia invisible which we cannot see; only God can. The truly elect of God who have been regenerated, reborn, effectually united to Christ, receiving all the benefits of His mediation; this invisible Church that only God can see; they shall never be overcome (Matt 16:18, Eph 6: 11 and following) as Jesus Christ promises that!

There is also here the church visible which is the one that you and I can see. At our anniversary service David Carson rightly pointed out that we are looking for the elect but they don't have a big letter E stamped on their backs. It would be easier for us perhaps if they did but that's not the way God has ordered things.

The visible church contains all those in the whole world who profess the name of the Lord Jesus Christ; formal churches like us here, house churches, perhaps a family meeting together as they have nowhere else to go. And amongst that church we are warned by Peter in his second epistle and in the Book of Jude there will be false professors and false teachers who will come amongst you with disturbing and destroying heresies.

You see there is the ideal Church, the invisible one that God alone sees and the visible Church, the one that we see.

Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 25

Verse 1 gives us a description of the invisible catholic (ie universal not Roman) church.

The catholic or universal Church which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have

been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all.

Then part 2 gives us a description of the visible Church.

Can you see that there's an ideal Church and an actual Church? The Church seen from God's perspective is the true Church and the gathering of people which is seen from man's perspective is a mixed multitude amongst which is found the true Church.

The Reformation dealt with these issues. The Roman Catholic Church argued, as it still does today, that if you are in good standing with the Roman Catholic Church then you are in good standing with God. The Bible argues differently. She keeps her people in submission to her by fear - by saying that as long as you are within the pale of the Roman Catholic Church you are saved; as long as you are baptised into her and remain in her.

I've witnessed to many Roman Catholics on the street and I particularly remember one woman who was on the very edge of confessing the Lord Jesus Christ but she told me herself *"I'm frightened, I'm frightened, I can't believe!"*

That's Rome - it keeps its followers by fear. It boasts and it brags of doing so. She says *"Give me a child until it's 7 and I'll keep it forever"*. She instills fear by saying if you leave the Roman Catholic Church then you are damned!

You can have shot somebody dead yesterday, come to mass this morning and be in good standing with the Roman Catholic Church. Being in good standing with the Roman Catholic Church is being in good standing with God, they'll say.

What they've done is to bring together the visible and the invisible Church completely losing the distinctions between them. And they're left with everybody in good standing in their church being one of God's elect. The loss of this distinction has led to the loss of the vital Gospel which brought life and freedom to men and religion has been followed by formalism and superstition.

The Reformation countered that demise and brought people out from it.

But there comes a problem with freedom. If you were to let someone out of jail this very morning, turn him out onto the streets and leave him there, first thing he'd think would be *"What do I do?"*

Perhaps if he was that way inclined he'd head straight for the nearest ale-house but he'd no doubt run wild to all kinds of excesses. He's been liberated, he can do what he pleases and that's what he does.

There was an old man I spoke to in Albania who I think I've told you about before. He was an army fighter pilot under the communist system and I asked him how much things had changed for the better with all the new freedom. He hated it - hated it! He liked the rules you see, he preferred being told what to do.

Many stay within the Roman Catholic Church because they like the rules and they don't want to think for themselves. But there are others who come out and run to all kinds of excess. They are free and can believe in what they want - the man in the moon if they choose. *"I'll do what I want; I'll believe what I want!"*

The Reformation was about the retrieval of Reformed government and my argument that I place before you is that the word Reformed and the word Presbyterian are synonymous. Luther kick-started the

Reformation but it was Calvin who consolidated it. Calvin's doctrine of the Church gave us the form of church government that I hope to explain to you if you will be patient with me and give me leave to do that.

Now I want to be fair to Baptists, I don't want to run them down in any way. It was the Anabaptists that went to the other extreme and I don't think you can liken today's Baptists to those Anabaptists.

The Anabaptists, at the time of the Reformation, ran to an utter and absolute extreme. They claimed that they could see the invisible Church - the Church that only God can see. They claimed to know who was truly regenerate and truly born again. Their agenda was to purify the membership of the Church and produce the ideal.

Now many people have tried to do this with the Lord's Table - genuinely and sincerely they have tried to *'fence the table'*. They do this to keep the Lord's Table pure and to keep away those who should be kept away and it's a good and godly intention. But beloved with reference to the Lord's Table it's absolutely and utterly impossible. Now of course we don't give those who are living in ungodliness and profanity membership of the Church or access to the Lord's Table. All I'm saying is that neither you nor I have can see into hearts to know who God's people are. We cannot see the invisible Church, that's why it's called the invisible Church, only God can see it.

So instead of the 2 extremes - the hierarchy of Rome and the wildness of the Anabaptists - Calvin argued for a more charitable judgement. He argued that people who are confessors of the faith, who live good and proper lives, who partake of the sacraments and profess the same God and same Christ as we should be given access and membership. As he says, our assurance of others is not necessary.

People say *"but we want to be sure...are they really Christians?"* Your assurance, my assurance, it isn't necessary - God knows those who are His. When Calvin spoke of the invisible Church he was saying in effect that our knowledge is not God's knowledge and there are some matters that we just have to leave to Him.

Calvin's distinction is as vital today as it was then as the children are mixed. Paul in Romans 9:6 and following dealing with a pastoral issue says that God's promise to Israel hasn't failed because all Israel are not Israel.

It was the same in Moses' day, they weren't all regenerate, and they weren't all born again. They didn't all understand the shafts of heavenly light given to them as signs nor did they all see these things pointed to Jesus Christ and trusted in Him. But Moses didn't draw a line in the sand and say *"All true believers this side, all you murmurers that side. You lot go back to Egypt and we'll continue to the Promised Land."* As not even Moses with all his wisdom and gifts knew who the elect were. He didn't even know that amongst the murmurers who have given him the hardest time there wasn't one of the elect yet to be converted.

The New Testament Church and the Church today is just the same. It's a mixture of those who profess the Lord Jesus Christ, are baptised into His name with their children, come to the Lord's Supper and meet and worship together. The children are mixed and the Church is mixed because within this visible Church not all are true children of God. Not all have received the Holy Spirit, not all have new hearts, and not all have received Christ's benefits. There are hypocrites, there are Ananiases and Sapphiras, there are those we are told who actually depart from the faith.

Westminster Confession of Faith chapter 25 section 5. *The purest Churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error; and some have so degenerated, as to become no Churches of Christ, but*

synagogues of Satan. Nevertheless, there shall be always a Church on earth, to worship God according to his will.

When you see the Church this way it begins to explain the problems of apostasy and of all the scandals. You have to keep reminding yourself that within the visible Church you have those who aren't necessarily God's.

Larger Catechism Question 61

Are all they saved who hear the gospel, and live in the Church?

A. All that hear the gospel, and live in the visible Church, are not saved; but they only who are true members of the Church invisible.

So the Reformation doctrine of the Church is our starting place and I hope we can build on that. It was fought for and won at the time of the Reformation but I suggest to you that today it has been lost along with many, many other of our Protestant principles. And the Church and our Nation is suffering because of it. It needs once again to be retrieved.

People speak about revival but I do seriously now question whether it is in fact reformation that we need because there is nothing there now to revive. Revival supposes that there is something there to be vivified. It's reformation we need - a return to the truth and a proclamation of the truth. We need a sowing of the truth in the hearts of God's people never mind the world out there!

Our Reformation doctrine needs to be retrieved if the Church is going to survive in our nation. Along with it must be church government as without that strong church government it is just like the days of Judges.

I was speaking to a friend of mine who is pastor of a Baptist church and he said to me "*Jim, I agree with you. If I could be a Baptist and a Presbyterian I would be so*"

The lack of government in the Church is deplorable, the wildness, it's like the days of Judges as everyone does exactly what they see as being right in their own eyes. Someone could come and plant a church across the road without any authority from anyone or any place. Anybody can start up a church and they do. Many times they haven't got a clue what they are doing - madness. People can walk out of churches and divide the body of Christ for no biblical reason whatsoever. Then they walk into another church without any question whatsoever. If someone comes through that door and says I want to join the church then the first thing I want to know is why did they leave their church? Did they have biblical grounds for doing so or was it just their whim just because a pastor or an elder upset them?

Strong government is a necessity for the Church today and is between the two extremes I have sought to describe to you today - independency and the hierarchy of Rome.

The Reformation clearly distinguished the Church:

The pure administration of the Word of God, the confession of Christ and the conduct of believers.

Officers - elders, pastors and deacons - nothing else.

Men -not women - ordained to those offices. (Not leadership let's talk in biblical language).
Men appointed and gifted by God to operate in those offices in order to govern the Church, not
by their own imaginations and thinking but by the Word of God and the Word of God only.
That's their only authority. Any who ever step outside this Word then he's out of his boundaries.
The Word of God and the Word of God alone.

Amen