

Doctrine of the Church: Government & Presbyterianism

We are on page 47 of Edmund Clowney's book, *The Church*, and we are talking about the government of the church overview. Let us take a look at New Testament churches. We can distinguish between four different uses of the word "church" or "churches" in the New Testament. Sometimes a church meeting in a person's or people's home is called a church, a house church. In other words, in 1 Corinthians 16:19 we learn of the church that meets in the house of Aquilla and Priscilla. It was a house church. So church can mean a small entity. It can mean a congregation of people that meet in a home.

On the other hand, as we go from micro to macro, there are metropolitan or city-wide churches. Act 8:1 speaks of the church in Jerusalem: "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church of Jerusalem and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria." Not only could a church denominate a house gathering, but it could also speak of a city-wide entity as well.

Getting larger still we have the mention of provincial churches. Acts 9:31 says, "Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace." That is because God had converted Saul, the primary enemy of the church, disturber of the church. "It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord." The church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria speaks in terms of Roman provinces. So the word church could speak of a gathering in a home, the people of God in a city, and now even bigger in whole provinces. And it could be a designation for the church in its totality. We find this in Acts 15 where it speaks of the ecumenical church, the whole church of the believers.

Of course every particular church member did not come to the council, but representatives from the churches did. And so in Acts 15:22 we read, "Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas." Here "whole church" means the church ecumenical, the church in its largest conception. It had representatives in the apostles and elders. There is diversity in the New Testament designations of the church.

Let us look at Presbyterian churches' theology and church order. First we will talk about its theology. There are three distinctive principles to Presbyterianism: the regulative principle, the organic principle, and the principle of the parity and plurality of leadership.

The regulative principle means that the Word of God alone regulates or rules the church. The Lord Jesus rules His church by His Word. Applied to worship this principle means that ways contrary to the Word are forbidden. Only ways that are in keeping with the Word in principle are permissible. Ways that contradict the Word are forbidden. The regulative principle applied to worship is saying that the Word of God regulates Christian worship.

Some may ask if Calvin taught this. In our own seminary journal, *Presbyterian*, there was a two-installment article on this particular subject written by a man named R. J. Gore who did his dissertation at Westminster Seminary. Gore would say yes, Calvin did teach the basic principle. He would also say no, Calvin would not agree in every particular area with some exponents today who use the Word in a way that would constrict the worship and freedom of the people of God. I am with Gore in sympathy and principle.

So first of all, the Word of God should regulate the church's worship, and then second, the church's doctrine. Applied to faith this means that the church may not require a belief not found in the Word of God.

Let me give some illustrations. If a church decided that they can function quite well without the Lord's Supper, this would be a violation of the regulative principle where Christ commanded His apostles to do this in remembrance of Him. It is simply not negotiable. It is part of the functioning of the church to have the Lord's Supper. The Bible regulates. It tells us what we are to have and what we are not to have. Within those parameters there is freedom of style and custom as Clowney has pointed out. But we are not free to do whatever we want in worship, and we are not free to dispense with biblical elements. Preaching cannot be done away with either. Paul commanded Timothy to preach the Word. The pure preaching of the Gospel is one of the marks in the church. We cannot do away with it. The Bible does not decree how many minutes a sermon should be, what kind of illustrations and applications you have to use, or what you have to wear in order to preach. Those things have varied with time and locale. The fact is there is to be preaching, prayer, singing, and worship, as Clowney has outlined those essential elements. They seem to be not negotiable.

Applied to faith, the regulative principle means we cannot require things the Bible does not require. We could ask the question, "What can we require a person to believe in order to join the church?" My answer would be we can require only faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Though we may want the person to believe Orthodox Christian Theology, that is part of the discipling process. They cannot reject a major doctrine that would call into question their belief in the Gospel. However, even if they believe some wrong things, even if they believe in errancy, they should be a member of the Christian church. If they believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, we cannot deny them membership. If they have a feisty attitude and are argumentative, that is a problem that needs to be dealt with in itself. But we cannot add other requirements to faith in Christ as far as church membership goes. The Bible adds requirements, if you will, in terms of the offices of deacon and elder. We should adhere to those as well. But to make a list of things you have to believe, to require someone to sign the church doctrinal statement in order to join the church, seems to be wrong. The sole qualification for church membership seems to be faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The first distinctive principle to Presbyterianism was the regulative principle. The Bible is our standard for what we believe and how we live. It alone is the supreme authority for worship and for faith. The second principle is the organic principle. It views Christians not merely optimistically but as unified, belonging to Christ, and belonging to each other. In light of what we said about the New Testament churches and the various forms the church takes, it is one. Presbyterianism seeks to have a real sense and even practice of the unity of the church. The church is one and should function unitedly in localities (with local churches), in regions (with Presbyterians working together to further the Gospel), and with the church as a whole. This is the application of the assisted notion of a General Assembly.

I cannot prove these different manifestations. I can show that rule of a local church by elders is biblical. But I cannot prove that a person has to be part of a Presbytery of the General Assembly in order to be biblical. It seems like a very reasonable application of rule by elders, though. If the Christian church is one, we should look for ways to identify with other believers and not regard them as our enemies. In Presbyterianism, there are actual manifestations of the local church, regional church (which is a Presbytery), and the whole church working together (representatives coming together yearly at General Assembly to oversee the work of the church).

Are we to view these principles together? Is that important to see them side by side? Yes, these principles are held together. The regulative principle is what keeps Presbyterians from uniting organically in terms of church structure with people of other denominations in a given city. Although I

certainly hope they would unite with them in spirit, and I would encourage them to do certain ministries together.

The third distinctive principle of Presbyterianism is the parity (or equality) and plurality of leadership. Let us assume that the church is to be led by elders. Elders are equal in authority; the pastor does not have more authority under God than the other leaders of the church. He is one elder among others. Dr. Jones says in theory the PCA has two offices: elder and deacon. But in practice it has three: pastor, elder, and deacon. So elders are equal in authority, and there should be more than one elder per church. It is an equality and a plurality of leadership. It is not one person running the show, but rather a shared leadership among elders.

Now let us look at Presbyterian churches' church order. There are three degrees in church order: the local church and its session (its governing body), the regional church and its presbytery, and the whole church and its General Assembly. We will discuss again from micro to macro levels.

First, we will discuss the local church and its session. In quoting Dr. Jones, "The local church consists of a distinct membership organized as a local congregation with its officers. The membership of a local church consists of communicant members and non-communicant members, all of whom have the privilege of pastoral oversight, instruction, and government by the church." Let us define some terms.

Communicant members are those who have professed faith in Christ and have thereby been admitted to the Lord's Supper. Communicant means communing in the communion, participating in the Lord's Supper by profession of faith. Non-communicant members means the baptized children of believing parents who have not yet made public profession of faith and indicated their desire to take the Lord's Supper. They have not made a profession of faith before the elders of the church. In what sense are they members? As mentioned above, they have the privilege of pastoral oversight, instruction, and government by the church. They are members but they are non-communing members. This is based on a covenantal theology that views the family in a certain way and has a theological view of the Christian family.

A credible profession of faith is a confession of Christ that, to the best of the ability of the church leaders or the elders to determine, is credible—believable. Of course there is the element of human error.

The session is the ruling body of a local church, consisting of its pastors and elders. It is responsible for overseeing the items listed under the service of the church on page 46. These are worship, evangelism, discipline, diaconal ministries, edification of the church, and church property. The deacons predominately care for the church property, but they carry out the will of the elders in this regard. The elders are the ruling body of a local church.

Second, we will discuss the regional church and its presbytery. The regional church consists of all the members of the local churches and their ministers. The presbytery corresponds to the session on the local church level. The presbytery's ruling body consists of all pastors and elders of the congregations within that region. It is believers working together and having a common body of doctrine working together for the ministry of the church in their particular areas. The presbytery oversees the spiritual welfare of the churches within its care, always respecting the rights of the congregations. Some who believe in the autonomy of the local church are very suspicious of what they call hierarchialism. There need not be a heavy handedness. In fact, in the official documents in the PCA, that very thing is prohibited. For example, a Presbytery would never force a pastor upon a church. People have to vote and

receive their own pastor. The Presbytery will examine candidates and help the local church. Presumably all the pastors and elders working together have a better ability to examine candidates. They have to make sure the candidates are accurate in what they believe, examine letters of reference, and review their own ministerial experience in the past, their testimony, and their reputation. But it is the church's responsibility as a congregation to receive their pastors. It would be wrong for a Presbytery to force a pastor upon a congregation whether they like it or not.

The church order within the PCA is not perfect, but a natural outworking of the organic principle and the principle of the equality and plurality of elders. The church is an organism and it is manifested on a local level, on a regional level, and now as a whole entity.

The church does not necessarily find its elders and the General Assembly its pastor. The elders come from within the congregation, but the pastor may come from within or without. The Presbytery is simply involved in examining the pastor. As an exception, the Presbytery would be involved in getting the elders for a church that is starting from the beginning (as a church plant). But as time moves along, the local church has enough elders to examine the candidates and so forth. There would be some Presbytery involvement at the ordaining of those elders to the ministry, even if it was just checking and overseeing the work of the local church.

Last, let us look at the whole church as a body and its General Assembly. The whole church consists of all the members of its regional churches. The General Assembly is its governing body. So the local church is governed by the elders who sit in session. Regional church is governed by the Presbytery. And the whole church is governed by the General Assembly. The General Assembly consists of all teaching elders and representative ruling elders from each congregation. Things can get cumbersome if all the members came. This is a matter of the principle of representation of elders standing for the people.

Elders come from within the local church. Usually the congregation has opportunity to recommend names of potential candidates for elders and deacons to the existing session. The candidates themselves are asked before they are nominated. Then the elders exercise oversight in which candidates should actually be on the ballot. There usually are classes that go on so that the candidates get trained to understand the teaching of the church. Sometimes candidates disqualify themselves, perhaps because they are not ready yet. They may still take the classes, finding them very helpful. People who are nominated need to be serving and doing the work of the ministry in different capacities to be encouraged to pursue eldership. But some pastors encourage a lot of men to take the classes and serve the Lord in difference capacities. After a recommendation by the congregation, approval by the session, and training, the congregation has to vote on their leaders. It is a careful screening process of denominational recommendation, elders' oversight, and a period of instruction and education. Finally the people vote for their leaders and then there is a public ceremony of ordination to the office of elder. Ruling elders of the church are not usually paid. However, sometimes ruling elders are paid if they also have a job at the church such as a church administrator. Sometimes the session helps run the church in terms of business and legal matters.

Let us talk about being called into the ministry. Are ruling elders called into the ministry? Yes. My understanding of calling of individuals to Gospel ministry is similar to my understanding of the calling of people unto salvation. There is both an internal element and an external one. Even as a person has to hear the Gospel outside—on one's ears to be saved—then believe within, so there seems to be at least a twofold process in the call to become a ruling elder.

Paul writes to Timothy that if anyone aspires to the office of overseer, it is a good work that he desires to do. In 1 Timothy 3:1 Paul says, “Here is a trustworthy saying: if anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.” We need to be careful here because there are different personalities in the world. There are some quiet types who need real encouragement from others even to take the first step. And some others could be convinced they were called to be an elder, yet the congregation of which they were a part was not at all sure. There is an external verification principle. A person needs to have a desire and also some experience and outer confirmation. A calling at least involves those two elements and maybe more.

Some have asked when an elder will become an elder emeritus. This varies in local churches. Some have elders serve for many years, and then they take a deliberate sabbatical or break in order to recuperate. I have also known elders to step aside when there were severe enough problems in their families that they felt they should not be serving then.

When I spoke about taking classes to be trained to be a leader in the church, I did not mean seminary. I was thinking of classes in the church. Church is in proximity to the seminary. I think all different backgrounds ought to take advantage of seminary for all it is worth and take some courses, but it is not necessary to become a ruling elder. It would be ordinary in Presbyterian circles for ministers to have a seminary degree. There are exceptions, but ordinarily a seminary degree is strongly recommended and even required for Presbyterian pastors, although I have known exceptions to that.

I have not mentioned a term or a limit on the service of elders. Could there be some danger of an elite or ruling class in the church? I do not know biblically of a time period for ordination to the ministry. I would see it as being life long in ordinary circumstances. There are elders in the church who sufficiently mess up and do not get disciplined. But some do step aside. There is also danger of leaders abusing their power. We need to take to heart passages such as 1 Peter 5 that speak to that very matter.