

Shepherd Leader Training Session 3: Ecclesial Polity

Introduction:

Why ought we to concern ourselves with "what form of church government?"

Read 2 Tim.1:13. What is included by "sound words" from the context?

Samuel Miller, *The Ruling Elder*

It is plain from the word of God, as well as from uniform experience that the government of the Church is a matter of great importance: that the form as well as the administration of that government is more vitally connected with the peace, purity and edification of the Church than many Christians appear to believe; and, of consequence, that it is no small part of fidelity to our Master in heaven to "hold fast" the form of ecclesiastical order as well as the "form of sound words" which He has delivered to the saints. (See also, 1 Cor.14:33)

James Bannerman, *Church of Christ*

Christ is the Founder of the Christian Church, in the sense that He gave it its origin at first, that He impressed upon it its character and arrangement,— that He laid down the framework of its government and order,— that He appointed to it its laws and office-bearers and ordinances,— that He invested it, in short, with the peculiar form and the peculiar constitution that distinguish it as a society; ... He is not only the Founder of the Christian church; He is also the Ruler and Administrator of it, in such a way that He keeps in His own hand to exercise that power, to administer that authority, and to dispense that grace. He is the Head of the Church in this sense, that the Church is not *only indebted* to Him for its existence at first, but for its *life and well-being* ever since; in this sense, that it is not the Church that governs and dispenses ordinances and spiritual graces in His name, and by reason of His original gift and endowment to her, but Christ who, personally present, governs and administers ordinances and blessing through the Church. Such then, is the source of the power of the Church." (p.198-9)

Stuart Robinson, True Presbyterian, Oct.29, 1863

Neither a theology without a Church, any more than a Church without a theology, fulfills all the conditions of a pure gospel? That Jesus Christ was not merely a teacher, as Socrates, but a legislator, as Solon, and the founder of a commonwealth.

- **Part 1: WCF 30, BCO Selections: Ecclesial Offices**
- **Part 2: WCF 31, BCO Selections: Synods and Councils**

Part 1: Ecclesial Offices

Ruling Elders Biblically Argued: The Redemptive Historical Context

Never been a time when God was present to mediate his rule vis-à-vis "elders"

OT Context :

Patriarchal era—Household organization (called "tribes") wherein the OT church was represented by their "elders" (heads of households), keeping in mind that households (tribes) were little communities consisting of perhaps 100's of

nuclear families/households... thus there were “delegated” assemblies who represented multiple smaller assemblies...

Ex. 3:16 Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, ‘The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, ...

Mosaic Era—Levitical Priesthood and Elders—2 office

Ex. 24:1 Then he said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar.

Deut. 1:11-18: May the LORD, the God of your fathers, make you a thousand times as many as you are and bless you, as he has promised you! 12 How can I bear by myself the weight and burden of you and your strife? 13 Choose for your tribes wise, understanding, and experienced men, and I will appoint them as your heads.’ 14 And you answered me, ‘The thing that you have spoken is good for us to do.’ 15 So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and experienced men, and set them as heads over you, commanders of thousands, commanders of hundreds, commanders of fifties, commanders of tens, and officers, throughout your tribes. 16 And I charged your judges at that time, ‘Hear the cases between your brothers, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the alien who is with him. 17 You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God’s. And the case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it.’ 18 And I commanded you at that time all the things that you should do.

Era of the Judges: 2:14-19; 3:9-11

- Role of Judge was to deliver from evil.
- A means of God's grace to His people.
- Exercised oversight, leadership and deliverance in God's name.

Era of the Kings:

- **1 Sam.16:4, 2 Kings 19:2**
Elders still function during administration of the Kings.

Prophetic Era:

- Ezekiel 8:1; 14:1; 20:1-2; Ezra 5:5-9; 6:7-8
- **Concerning coming Kingdom:** Is. 9:6-7
All previous government will be completed in and through the Messiah
"and the government shall rest on His shoulders"
"he will be called wonderful counselor, prince of peace..."

NT Context:

Gospels (Cornerstone): Anticipation of Christ Kingship mediated through government appointed by Christ through the foundation laid by the Apostles:

- Mt. 16: 18-19 (see also Mt. 18:17, church = counsel)
Matt. 18:15 If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. **16** But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the **church**. (delegated assembly) And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. **18** Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. **QUORUM?** **19** Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.

Acts and Epistles (Foundation)

- Acts 15—where MT 16:18 ss exactly what happened,
Eph. 2:20-- View Acts 15 as foundational and therefore prescribed by “divine law.”
- Acts 20.
Eph. 4:7-14
vs.10: "fill all things"
vs. 11: "gave some as ..."
vs. 12: for the building of the saints"
- 1 Tim. 3:1ff (cf. 2 Tim 5:17)—2 classes or offices of elders? Note Philip 1:1

- Titus 1 “appoint in every town “elders”
- Revelations: Assembly of elders throughout Rev. functioning in the way of representation
 - Rev. 4:4** Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated **on the thrones** were twenty-four **elders**, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads.
 - Rev. 5:8** And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four **elders** fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are **the prayers of the saints. c.f.**
 - Rev. 4:10, Rev. 5:14, Rev. 11:16, Rev. 19:4.**

What all these era’s share in common are this:

- Representative Rule and Oversight of “Lay heads of household/elder” coupled with Levitical Priesthood.
- Men carefully vetted as to be of high BIBLICAL (vs. worldly) qualifications (often the opposite of worldly qualifications)
- They served as “rulers and judges”
- Their corporate and jurisdictional power was limited to when they acted “jointly” (e.g. by consensus) even if they had exemplary/personal influence acting severally (individually).

Elder Responsibility: (again, more on this next week in specifics)

1Pet. 5:1 So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: **2** shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; **3** not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. **4** And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. **5** Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Member responsibility:

1 Peter 5: 5 Likewise, you who are younger (as less spiritually mature), be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

1Th. 5:12 And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, **13** and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves.

Heb. 13:7 Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.

Heb. 13:17 Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

Heb. 13:24 Greet all those who rule over you, and all the saints.

PCA Book of Church Order

"Preface"

Jesus Christ, upon whose shoulders the government rests (Isaiah 9:6)... having all power given unto Him in heaven and in earth by the Father (Matt.28:18)... (as) Head over all things to the Church, which is His body; the fullness of Him that filleth all in all (Eph. 1:20-23); He being ascended up far above all heavens, that He might fill all things, received gifts for His Church, and gave all offices necessary for the edification of His Church and the perfecting of His saints.(Eph.4:10-12)

Jesus, the Mediator, the sole Priest, Prophet, King, Saviour, and Head of the Church, contains in Himself, by way of eminency, all the offices in His Church, and has many of their names attributed to Him in the Scriptures. He is Apostle, Teacher, Pastor, Minister, Bishop and the only Lawgiver in Zion.

It belongs to His Majesty from His throne of glory to rule and teach the Church through His Word and Spirit by the ministry of men; thus mediately exercising His own authority and enforcing His own laws, unto the edification and establishment of His Kingdom.

Question of “Offices?”:

- How many?

- *What are they specifically?*
- *How are they distinguished “theologically”?*
- *How are they distinguished by job descriptions?*

It should be stated from the onset concerning the “elder” that within present PCA expression of Presbyterianism, the answer is arguably tilted toward “2 offices of elders” in the *Confession of Faith* (not revised into the American Context), but then tilted toward a 1 office, two “functions” (perhaps “classes”) position in BCO 8 and elsewhere.

WCF 30-31

30.1. The Lord Jesus, as King and Head of his church, hath therein appointed a government, in the hand of church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.

31.1. For the better government, and further edification of the church, there ought to be such assemblies as are commonly called synods or councils: and it belongeth to the overseers and other rulers of the particular churches, by virtue of their office, and the power which Christ hath given them for edification and not for destruction, to appoint such assemblies; and to convene together in them, as often as they shall judge it expedient for the good of the church.

Two observations about the choice of language in WCF:

1) Notice that “officers” in 30.1 are distinguished in 30.1 as “overseers” (Grk. Episkopos) and “other rulers.” This was very deliberate as “other rulers” was described from passages such as Romans 12:8, *he that ruleth, with diligence, (KJV)* and 1 Corinthians 12:28, *And God hath set some in the church... governments, (KJV)* and NOT 1 Tim 3 or elsewhere... e.g. viewed as an assistant “elder” to Pastor-Elder... But who then are the other rulers?

2) One option OFF the table according to the deliberations of Westminster is to confuse the “bishop/pastor” with “other rulers.” *Hence the refusal of the Westminster divines to allow any of the proof-texts relating to elders/presbyters (clergy) to be used to support the work of those whom they preferred to call, ‘other church governors’ (note #1 above)*

BCO 8:1

This office is one of dignity and usefulness. The man who fills it has in Scripture different titles expressive of his various duties. As he has the oversight of the flock of Christ, he is termed Bishop or Pastor. (episkopos) As it is his duty to be grace and prudent, and example to the flock, and to govern well in the house and Kingdom of Christ, he is termed Presbyter or Elder. (presbuteros) As he expounds the Word, and by sound doctrine both exhorts and convinces the gainsayer, he is termed teacher. *These titles do not indicate different grades of office, but all describe one and the same office.*

BCO assumptions from scripture:

- Elders by virtue of Qualifications (vs. job description per se)
 - 1 Timothy 3:1-7 (8-13 If elders?)
 - Titus 1:6-9
- Plurality of Elders:
 - Acts 14:23
 - Titus 1:5
- Means of Grace
 - Eph.4:12-14
 - Heb. 13:17ff
- Two *classes* (vs. offices): "Ruling" and "Teaching" elders
 - 1Tim.5:17-18 applied to 1 Tim 3:1-7 (not 3:8ff “deacon”)
- "Elders": According to BCO is referenced by three words used interchangeably in Bible to describe one office “elder”: (Acts 20:17, 28:1; 1 Peter 5:1-4) Key here is that *all describe one and the same office*

1. "episkopos" (overseer)
2. "poiane" (shepherd)
3. "presbuteros"(elder)

Pastor Specific Job Description—Hardly Anything!

Moderator of Session: BCO 10-3. The pastor is, for prudential reasons, moderator of the Session. (c.f. 12-2. The pastor is, by virtue of his office, the moderator of the Session).

Implied, To Preach the Gospel: 18-1. A candidate for the ministry is a member of the Church in full communion who, believing himself to be called to preach the Gospel,

- What should the congregation expect from their pastor?
- What is a fair and Biblical way of evaluating a pastor? Etc.

Two Important New Testament Passages:

1 Tim 3:1-7, 8-14.

1-7: The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. **2** Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, **3** not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. **4** He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, **5** for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? **6** He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. **7** Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

- *Overseer*—"episkopos" – is this a pastor (TE) only or does this envision both "TE and RE")?
- *Apt to teach*—can a person be an elder who is not "apt to teach?" e.g. can it envision a "RE" that isn't also a TE?

8-13: Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. **9** They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. **10** And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. **11** Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. **12** Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. **13** For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.

Deacons likewise?

- Likewise = "deacon elders" (two offices—both "elders" or "likewise deacon elder" distinguished from "bishop-elders" —c.f. 1 Tim 5:17)
- Likewise= "in giving description" (separate office- non elder but deacon-leader in mercy) thus 1 Tim 5:17 references an elder class not mentioned in 1 Tim 3.

1 Tim 5:17

17 Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. **18** For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages." **19** Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.

- Distinguishes two types of elders (note "especially")
 - One elder "who rules well" and the other who evidently rules, but "especially labors in preaching/teaching."

- The latter “elder” is worthy of “double honor” or a) “wages (vs. 18) and b) special provisions to protect him against public slander given his unique role (vs. 18)
- Does the two types of elder pertain to just “bishop/shepherds” of 3:1 (as two classes of bishops)? Or does the two types of elder pertain to “bishop-elder” (3:1) and “deacon-elder” (3:8)?
- It is generally conceded the clear distinction between “elder” and “deacon” as two distinct offices. This then can be applied to a 2 (pastor-elder, deacon elder), 2.5(Elder (some who preach) and deacon (mercy), 3 (pastor, elder, deacon) even 4 (Bishop, Pastor, Elder, deacon) offices.
- Must be careful to discern that the twofold BCO distinction of “elder” and “deacon” is NOT, as often assumed, the distinction made in 1 Tim 3:1ff and 8ff. In 3:1ff and 8ff, the distinction is between “bishop” and “deacon” respectively
- Therefore, the issue is how to understand 1 Tim 5:17. Is the office of “elder” regarding two offices, but elder corresponding to “bishop-elder” and “deacon-elder.” Or is the office of elder regarding one office of “bishop” albeit some more apt to teach than others? (But what about the stated “quaFocusing upon the elder office big question will be to ask, how 1 Tim 3 relates to 1 Tim 5:17.
- Especially those who labor in preaching and teaching? Does this correspond to “able to teach” in 1 Tim 3:1ff per “overseer” as then to be one office of “elder” among the other who is “ruler”?
- E.g. IF “able to teach” IS a requirement, as plainly stated to be an “overseer” then are the “other rulers” of WCF viewed as “assisting in ruling as referenced in Rom and 1 Cor (see above), or is there another “elder” that is being referenced 1Tim 3:8 called “deacon” as then related to one of the two types of elders in 1 Tim 5:18?
 - Notice qualifications seem almost identical and ruling own household is envisioned also Notice also that if not, then left with weak evidence for the office of RE if only two vague references in a long list of services to the church..

Three options within historic Presbyterianism

1) 3 (plus?) office position— This view was espoused by John Calvin and can be traced through the Scottish and Westminster Tradition, into the 19th century through Smyth and Hodge during the 19th century debates.¹

- Bishop/Pastor-- 1 tim 3:1ff),
- Other assisting rulers—not listed in 1 Tim. 3, but referenced in 1 Tim 5:17 and Romans 12:8, he that ruleth, with diligence, (KJV) and 1 Corinthians 12:28, And God hath set some in the church... governments, (KJV)
- Deacons (mercy)-- 1 Tim 3:8ff

As noted by Murray, “this view accepts two groups of men called to the spiritual oversight of the church but it says they do not hold the same office. Thus two offices elders and elder assistants plus deacon, etc. (if others. C.f Calvin “doctor”)

2. 2.5 Office position—An “American” adaptation of 3 office as to further “democratize the office of elder. Espoused by Samuel Miller, James Henley Thornwell and others during the 19th century American debates and popularly known as the “two and a half office view” in the PCA denomination today.

1. Elders (TE and RE)
2. Deacons- Mercy Ministry

¹ For John Calvin, see *The Register of the Company of Pastors of Geneva in the Time of Calvin*, ed. and transl. by Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), pp. 41f. “The Ecclesiastical Ordinances, the foundation of the whole organization and discipline of the church of Geneva, were promulgated by the General Council on 20 November 1541, scarcely more than two months after Calvin’s return to Geneva.” *The Register*, p. 35 n1, Scottish Tradition see, *The First Book of Discipline* (1560), *The Second Book of Discipline* (1578), *Book of Discipline* (1587) all of which contained in David W. Hall and Joseph H. Hall, *Paradigms in Polity: Classic Readings in Reformed and Presbyterian Church Government* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 224f. For the Westminster Tradition, see *The Form of Presbyterian Church-Government*, in *Westminster Confession of Faith*, (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1958 (originally 1646)), p. 402. For the 19th Century American context, see Charles Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1878), pp. 264f. For a more recent discussion and especially pertaining to the 2 office, (pastor, ruling-deacon) view that is summarized here as “view 4c”, see T. F. Torrance, *The Eldership in the Reformed Church*, (Hansel Press: Edinburgh, 1984).

This is the view which believes the New Testament office of elder (Gk: presbuteros) is one office, but that it contains within it two distinct groups or classes of men: those in one group both preach and participate in the government and oversight of the people; those in the other only rule and govern. In rank and authority the two groups are equal, they differ only in function: some are teaching elders (traditionally called 'ministers', while the remainder (often simply called 'elders') are only sharers in the government of the church.

3. *2 Offices Position (no mercy-deacon office)*— A pre-Westminster assembly position that informed assembly represented by the views of George Gillispie, James Bannerman, J. N. D. Kelly and T. F. Torrance.²

1. Bishop-Elder : (1 Tim 3:1-7, 1 Tim 5:17 ("especially those who teach"), Philip 1:1)

2. Deacon-Elder: 1 Tim 3:8ff, 1 Tim 5:17(who rule well), Philip 1:1

"It would seem to be the case that our elders now fulfill a ministry which in the New Testament itself is ascribed to deacons. In other words, the best, and indeed the only biblical evidence for the ministry fulfilled by our elders is found in New Testament teaching about deacons, supplemented by what we learn from Early Church documents... It might be said, then, that what we call 'elders' are really 'elder-deacons'."³ T F Torrance

The Hermeneutic of Westminster Applied:

- All expressions of the 2 office (bishop-elder, deacon-elder) will explicitly employ a Biblical hermeneutic that recognizes continuity between the Old and New Testaments, between the office of "pastor" and the "Levitical priesthood"! This was, for instance, clearly expressed in *The Form of Presbyterian Church-Government*, appended to most editions of the Westminster Confession:

As there were in the Jewish church elders of the people joined with the priests and Levites in the government of the church; so Christ, who hath instituted government, and governors ecclesiastical in the church, hath furnished some in his church, beside the minister of the word, with gifts for government, and with commission to execute the same when called thereunto, who are to join with the minister in the government of the church. Which officers reformed churches commonly call Elders⁴

- Accordingly, Jack Kinneer rightly observes, "it is evident that the Westminster divines regarded the New Covenant ministry as a fulfillment and continuation of the priestly ministry of the Old Covenant to a considerable extent." Kinneer further comments, "during the Protestant reformation, the idea of the priesthood of all believers was used effectively to counter the claims of the Roman Church about its priesthood. And yet, this did not lead to a rejection of a special ministry in the church, but rather to a reform of that ministry... In their justification of the special ministry of the New Covenant and in particular the pastoral ministry, the Reformers and their successors appealed to the priesthood of the Old Covenant as providing a model."⁵
- Note also the concessions that were made even by Westminster, that if there is an office of "ruling elder", it most likely corresponded to the "deacon" of the New Testament. As documented by T. F. Torrance: "Two significant points emerged in the Westminster discussion that should be noted.
(a) 'Elders' could be read into these New Testament passages only on the assumption that the Early Church had instituted something analogous to the 'elders of the people' found in the Old Testament; and

² The biblical proof that is most often noted is the observation that where there IS a description of offices in the New Testament, there are only two that are ever mentioned together, such as in the salutary address in Philippians 1:1 (bishops and deacons) as corresponding perfectly with the qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 of bishop and deacons respectively, even as this corresponds to the two-fold designation in Acts 6, especially if one holds that the pastoral office is in succession to the apostolic office, albeit in a non-foundationist capacity such as to not continue in a revelatory capacity, but only as to assist in illumination when accompanied by the Holy Spirit and grounded in scripture. And if understood to be referenced in 1 Timothy 5:17, then they both would be "elders" in a general sense.

³ T. F. Torrance, *The Eldership in the Reformed Church*, p. 10

⁴ It is here made clear that the redemptive historical continuity between the Old Testament Levitical priesthood and the office of pastor is in fact assumed in order to interpret "office" out of Romans 12:8 and 1Cor.15:12!

⁵ Jack Dennis Kinneer, "Priesthood in the Ministry" p. 183, in *Order in the Church*, Mark Brown, etc. 181ff c.f. John Calvin, *Institutes...*, IV, IV. and. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1975).

(b) the Church officials that they called 'other Church governors', as even George Gillespie admitted, probably corresponded to 'deacons' in the Early Church."⁶

Redemptive Historical Argument:

Old Covenant Context:

- The Old Testament precedence for the distinction of at least two offices is crucial corresponding to the Levitical priesthood and the representative elders respectively. And yet, the absence of a third, "diaconal", office in the Old Testament, together with the scant New Testament support for the office of ruling elder (if "deacon" is a 3rd office) is likewise troubling.
- It can certainly be observed that in the Old Testament, the precedence is set for a two-office view of priestly-pastor and governing-elder respectively in Exodus 18:13ff as precedence setting.⁷
- That the Exodus event was in fact an ancient "ordination" of officers is evidence by the use of such language as "appoint" and "choose" in vs. 24-26 that is throughout the Hebrew associated with divine ordination.⁸
- Whereas the office of priest and governing elders were clearly distinct in the Old Testament, they sat together "in session" in order to govern the Old Covenant congregation is documented in 2 Chronicles 19:8 where it is noted that "in Jerusalem, Jehoshaphat appointed certain Levites and priests and heads of families of Israel, to give judgment for the LORD and to decide disputed cases. They had their seat at Jerusalem."

New Covenant Context:

- Robert Rayburn makes a good point that "A simple demonstration of the significance of the Old Testament materials for the determination of questions surrounding the nature and number of church offices is furnished by the fact that "elder" is an Old Testament title and office and is introduced without comment in the narrative of the establishment of the apostolic church (Acts 11:30). This strongly suggests that the office there referred to was simply the Old Testament office carried over into the new order."⁹
- It is argued that it makes perfect sense of the Sanhedrin in the first century. That is, in the Sanhedrin during the time of Christ as passed down from the Old Testament context, there was a distinction between the clergy and lay elders. As noted by Clowney:

Each Jewish community had its council of elders or presbytery (Luke 7:3). This then makes sense of Luke's description of the officials who accost Christ in the temple as "the chief priests and the scribes with the elders" (Luke 20:1). It is significant to notice that this is the same order that is ordinarily used in the New Testament for stating the members of the Sanhedrin (Mk.11:27, 14:43, 15:1, Mt.27:41). To be sure, the order is sometimes varied (Mk.8:31, 14:53, Mt.16:21, Acts 4:5) and the scribes are sometimes omitted (Mt.21:23, 26:3, 27:1, 3, 12, 20; 28:11-12, Acts 4:8, 23, 23:14; 25:15). And there are even times when elders and scribes are mentioned together (Acts 6:12). And yet, like the Old Testament, the "elders" are called "elders of the people" (Mt. 21:23, 26:3, 47, 27:1).¹⁰
- Transitioning to NT,
- this view understands 1Tim 5:17 as corresponding to a board of elders (like the Sanhedrin) as then pertaining to the post-apostolic offices of "bishop/pastor" and "elder deacon" in 1Tim 3:1ff and 3:8ff respectively.
- This is supported by the two-office language that is used by Paul in his salutation in Philippians, where only two formal offices are mentioned, the offices of "bishop" (corresponding to 1Tim.3:1ff) and "deacon" corresponding to 1Tim. 3:8ff). In other words, the "elders who rule well" reference in 1 Timothy 5:17 refers to the "deacon-elder" (3;8ff) and the elder who "labors in the Word and doctrine" pertains to the bishop-elder(3:1).

⁶ T. F. Torrance, *Eldership in the Church*

⁷ Numbers 11:16ff, and Dt. 1:9ff.

⁸ c.f. Dt. 4:37, 7:7, 10:15, Josh 8:3, 1Sam.2:28.

⁹ Robert Rayburn, "Ministers, Elders, and Deacons", *Order in the Offices*, Mark Brown, editor... P. 224. He also quotes James Bannerman, "The polity of the New Testament was founded upon the model of the Old Testament ecclesiastical government." See Jame Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, II (Edinburgh, 1960), 305. Cf. Dabney, "Theories of the Eldership," 128-29.

¹⁰ Edmund Clowney, "A Brief For Church Governors...", p. 48.

- The two-fold distinction makes perfect sense of Acts 6, highly reminiscent of Exodus 18 and later Numbers 11:16ff, and Dt. 1:9ff, and the appointment of representatives from among the people to assist with the government of the church in order to preserve the unique calling of the apostles in their labor of word, as to anticipate the apostolic succession of the ministry of word in the office of pastor, as distinct from the ruling deacon. This then explains Acts 20:28, where the term “bishop” (*episkopos*) is applied to pastors in the context of assembling together the “elders” in vs. 17.
- The term “elders” in 1 Tim 5:17 (especially as the term was passed down from the Old Testament and expanded under the Sanhedrin context), as containing both the *offices* (not just functions) of pastor-elder and ruling-deacon, corresponding then to a plain reading of 1 Timothy 3:1ff and 3:8ff respectively.

Therefore.

- Notice that while church government has always been present, albeit in different administrations throughout redemptive history, it has always reflected what could at the least be described as a “two-office” expression. E.g. the office of “teaching/priestly elder” and “ruling elder--” the latter as chosen from “among the people” or “representative.” Exodus 18:13ff, (c.f. 2Chron.19:89)

Two Office comparison and contrast:

- **The lay-elders** focused upon the governing aspects and grew naturally out of the patriarchic family system and continued through the Mosaic period even into the exile. This office was set apart in its “uniquely representative” nature as a lay-office and was therefore “selected by the people and speaking and acting on their behalf.”¹¹ The lay-elder office was “regarded by the principle of representation as the whole congregation of Israel.¹² There was “no evidence that the ministry of Word or the teaching of the law was ever assigned to this office or that the ability to teach had any bearing on qualifications for it,”¹³

One can notice for instance how “frequently the body of elders is regarded by the principle of representation as the whole congregation of Israel.¹⁴ They ask for a king on behalf of the people in 1Sam.8:4, and enter into covenant on behalf of Israel in 2 Sam.5:3, Ex.24:1ff.¹⁵ As then noted by Clowney, “following the Exile, an aristocratic nobility seems to have continued the functions of a national eldership in Israel, even as Nehemiah lists nobles who are “heads of their fathers houses.”¹⁶

The primary function of the elder was to rule and judge between disputes, together with represent the people in matters with God.¹⁷ There is, in other words, “no evidence that the ministry of Word or the teaching of the law was ever assigned to this office or that the ability to teach had any bearing on qualifications for it” according to Rayburn.¹⁸

“it is plain that these elders do not become prophets; they are not of those who will be raised up “like unto Moses.” Neither were they teaching priests or Levites. Yet they received the Spirit for their task of administration and judgment, and initially the presence of the Spirit is manifested through ecstatic utterance.”¹⁹ Clowney,

- Compare then to Dt. 33:9-10 as describing the **office of pastor-priest**. The pastor-priests (out of the tribe of Levi) shared with the elders the responsibilities of judgment and rule with special responsibilities for difficult cases which

¹¹ C.f. Ex. 17:5-6, 19:7, 24:1-11, Lev. 4:13-15, Dt.21:1-9, 1Sam.8:43, 2Sam5:3, 1Kgs 20:7-8.

¹² C.f. Ex.12:3, 6, 21, 1Kgs 8:1, 2, 3, 5, 14, 22, 55, 62, 65. For instance, these lay-elders were seen requesting a king on behalf of the people in 1Sam.8:4, and acting on behalf of Israel in covenant making in 2 Sam.5:3, Ex.24:1ff.

¹³ c.f. Ezek. 7:26, Jer. 18:18.

¹⁴ C.f. Ex.12:3, 6, 21, 1Kgs 8:1, 2, 3, 5, 14, 22, 55, 62, 65.

¹⁵ Rayburn, p. 225

¹⁶ Clowney, p. 47-48. c.f. Ezra 8, Neh.7

¹⁷ Dt.25:1, 7, 19:12, 22:13ff, Josh 20:4,6.

¹⁸ c.f. Ezek. 7:26, Jer. 18:18.

¹⁹ Ibid.

required their expertise in the Scriptures.²⁰ And yet, these responsibilities were adjunct to their primary calling as ministers of the word and sacrament and as the superintendents of Israel's worship.²¹ As per the unique role of mediating between God and humanity, the priests were *not* chosen from among the family system per se, but were set apart by God from the tribe of Levi. They were of a "separate and distinct membership" and therefore "did not share the characteristically representative character of the eldership... the priesthood was organized according to a set of regulations which pertained to itself alone." They were in short claimed by God as his own ministers in Israel and were granted a direct ministerial authority not assigned to elders.²²

Part 2: Synods and Councils

Discussion: The Apostolic Church: Which Is It? Thomas Witherow

WCF Chapter 31 Study Guide

Of Synods and Councils

1. For the better government, and further edification of the church, there ought to be such assemblies as are commonly called synods or councils: and it belongeth to the overseers and other rulers of the particular churches, by virtue of their office, and the power which Christ hath given them for edification and not for destruction, to appoint such assemblies; and to convene together in them, as often as they shall judge it expedient for the good of the church.

2. It belongeth to synods and councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of his church; to receive complaints in cases of maladministration, and authoritatively to determine the same: which decrees and determinations, if consonant to the Word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission; not only for their agreement with the Word, but also for the power whereby they are made, as being an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in his Word.

3. All synods or councils, since the Apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both.

4. Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.

1. The first section of WCF 31 is derived from the record in Acts 15 regarding the council that met at Jerusalem. In asserting the propriety of such meetings, our form of government is different from another form of church government. The form(s) of church government which denies the propriety of such assemblies is called what?

1. Local Courts: (Session)

1 Cor. 5:11-13

2. Higher Courts: (Presbytery and Assembly)

Acts 15: 1-6

Acts 16:4

²⁰ cf. Dt. 17:8-13, 21:5, 1Chron.23:4.

²¹ Rayburn, p. 225-226. cf. Lev. 1:5ff, Ezek. 7:26, Ezra 7:10-11, Neh.8:7-9, 15:11ff, 1Chron 15:11ff, 16:4ff.

²² cf. Num.3:5-13, Num.6:22-27, Dt. 18:2, 5.

Note: Decrees made by court (Acts 15) constituted a standard for the churches to follow. They were “authorized” interpretations of the apostolic foundation upon Christ’s authority as cornerstone.

The Apostolic Foundation Illustrated in Acts 15

It has been said that Chapter 15 is the turning point, even “centerpiece” and watershed” of the book of Acts... and as noted as well by John Stott, “this is NOT an exaggeration.”

- For instance, in this chapter, Jerusalem is still at the center of the cultic universe, “but after this chapter Jerusalem recedes into the background as Paul pushes on beyond Asia into Europe and Rome appears on the horizon.”
- Again, already the focus has moved from Peter to Paul in Chapter’s 12-13, but here in chapter 15, Peter makes his final appearance in the story.
- And of course, we are taken by Luke to the first ecumenical counsel whereby the gospel was liberated from its mono-cultural Jewishness into becoming a multi-cultural church which is based on faith alone in Christ rather faith in Christ plus...!

The question: Terms of Communion (gets at the nature and extent of grace!)

“ what means of incorporation into the believing community did God intend for Gentiles? So far, it had been assumed that they would be absorbed into Israel by circumcision and that by observing the law they would be acknowledged as bona fide members of the covenant people of God.” John Stott

E.g. What our polity describes as the “terms of communion” (admission to Lord’s Supper, basis for Assurance!)

The Method: Convening of a Counsel

- Not a “voluntary” or “self-appointed” assembly—but a “delegated” or “appointed” assembly—
“ representatives from Antioch where chosen to convene with representative in Jerusalem... such that when they came to Jerusalem, *“they were welcomed (a formal term, “received” as to be admitted) by the church and the apostles and elders.”*
- *The familiar “ordained” dyad—apostles and elders—Titus 1, etc.*
- *OT-Sanhedrin Precedence (see below):* the common link in all eras of redemptive history that ties all administrations of church order together is the principle of the eldership acting severall (individually) and jointly (by delegated or representative assemblies)

The Ruling: (Lit. the word is used as reference to a formal judgment as from some court context—in this case a church court as convened in Jerusalem)

The gist of the decision was that the Gentiles should not be burdened by asking them to do anything save believe in Christ in order to receive salvation... ..

And yet, having established the principle of salvation by grace through faith alone, they did exhort them to respect the consciences of their Jewish fellow-believers by not making it an issue for them in their presence either.. which might unnecessarily prevent the gospel from being received by them as well....thus Rom 14!! (eg. 4 Aspects of the ceremonial laws in the OT derived from distinguishing their worship from pagan worship are noted as “non-binding.” c.f .Sermon)

The Impact:

First, the church disassociated themselves from the circumcision party and those who would still seek to require Mosiac compliance as a right to be right with God! (this is huge even until this day!)

Second, the letter clearly distinguished between an “authorized” vs. unauthorized teaching—they made it abundantly clear that the men they choose, presumably as through the laying on of hands as noted elsewhere, were set apart to represent the apostolic teachings... a practice that is of course carried out until this day as by church courts for the same exact purpose

Third—they enunciated their unanimous decision as now attributed to the Holy Spirit not to burden the Gentiles with anything beyond faith as a basis of being accepted by God!

Fourth—the impact for the progress of the gospel was huge.

- Having shared with his readers the text of the letter, Luke now documents its reception by the largely Gentile churches...
 - first in Syrian Antioch (15:30-35,
 - secondly Syria and Cilicia (15:36-40) and
 - thirdly in Galatia (16:1-5...)
- In each of the three instances, Luke makes a similar statement about the church... that the churches were strengthened! God used the regional church, as specifically organized and instituted by God upon the foundation of the apostles, to settle the question at hand—thus rendering the saying true, that the church is “the pillar and bulwark of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15).

Church History bears this out as well:

The Trinitarian (Doctrine of God) controversies..

- The Council of Nicaea (A.D.325)
- The Council of Constantinople (A.D.381)

The Soteriological (Doctrine of Salvation) Controversies:

- Synod of Carthage in A.D. 418.
- Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431.

The Issue of Church Authority and Relation to Salvation During Reformation:

- One will of course think of the later reformation councils that resolved the idea of church authority as related to scripture, justification and worship as resolved in
- Synod of Dort in A.D. 1618-1619.
- The Scots Confession (1560)—approved by Reformation Parliament and Church of Scotland, attaining full legal status with the departure of Mary, Queen of Scots in 1567.
- The Geneva Confession (1536)—together with a translation of Calvin’s Catechism (1541)
- The Second Helvetic Confession (1561) and approved by General Assembly in 1566 in the Reformed Scottish Church.
- Heidelberg Catechism (1563)
- Westminster Confession (1646)
- Helvetic Consensus Formula (1675 A.D.)

Not one of these synods/councils consisted of self-appointed people voluntarily organized to settle a question—rather these were all councils consisting of representatives from visible and local churches, forming into a regional context of the church no less in order to settle questions that related to the peace, purity and grace of the gospel!

2. According to the Westminster Assembly, what three things “belongeth to” synods and councils to do? (section 2)

3. Before the Assembly mentions submission to the decisions of church councils, it qualifies this submission in an important way (see section 2). What is this qualification?

4. WCF 31.3 could not be affirmed by some who profess to be Christians. What body of professing Christians would deny this?

5. What are the two circumstances under which it would be proper for an ecclesiastical council to address "civil affairs which concern the commonwealth"?

NOTE: Erastianism Controversy that Informed Westminster

Compare and contrast the nature and duties of the church and state in their various capacities according to George Gillespie in his famous *One Hundred and Eleven Propositions*, laid before the General Assembly of 1647. Notice also how these informed Stuart Robinson during the civil war, and how his good friend and co-editor of the *Presbyterial Critic*, Thomas Peck, also provides a good summary as from his *Notes on Ecclesiology*.

1. That the state is an ordinance of God considered as the creator, and, therefore, the moral governor of mankind, while the church is an ordinance of God considered as the saviour and restorer of mankind. The state is ordained for man as man; the church for man as a sinner in a condition of inchoate restoration and salvation. The state is for the whole race of man; the church consists of that portion of the race which is really, or by credible profession, the mediatorial body of Christ. (275)

2. The next point of difference between church and state is in the rules by which they are to be respectively regulated in the exercise of their functions. The rule of the church is the word of God, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. This is the statute book of the visible kingdom of Christ. The rule for the state is the "light of nature," or the human reason. The power of the church is, strictly and only, "ministerial and declarative"; the power of the state is magisterial and imperative. The church has no power to *make* laws, but only to *declare* the law of God. All her acts of government are acts of obedience to her Head and King. The state has the power to make laws as well as to declare them; has a legislative as well as a judicial power. Hence, the form of government for the church, the regulative and the constitutive principles of her organization, are not matters to be determined by human reason, but to be derived from the Bible as the constitution and statute-book: while, in the state, these are matters to be settled by the history and condition of political communities. The life of the state is natural, and it is left to assume an organization for itself. The life of the church is supernatural, and God prescribes an organization for it. (281)

3. The church and the state differ in their *sanctions*, as well as in their *authority* and their *rule*. The sanction of ecclesiastical government is *moral*, appealing to the faith and the conscience, a parental *discipline*, designed for the good of the offender. Its symbol is the "keys." The sanction of civil government is *force*, appealing to the bodily sensibilities of the subject or the citizen; a *penal* administration, designed to vindicate the majesty of justice and the supremacy of law, with a very incidental, if any, reference to the good of the transgressor. Its symbol is the "sword." (287)

4. "The scope and aim of civil power is only things *temporal*; of the ecclesiastical power, only things *spiritual*. *Religious* is a term not predicable of acts of the state; *political* and *civil*, not predicable of acts of the church." (See Robinson)

6. What are three common forms of government?

1. Prelacy: administered by archbishops, bishops, deans, archdeacons and other ecclesiastical offices on a hierarchial system by hierarchial appointment vs. representative or congregational determined offices. All things are general. (Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Greek Orthodox, Methodist)

James Bannerman:

The Proper and essential distinction between the two systems is the assertion by Episcopalians and the denial by Presbyterians of Scriptural warrant for a third order of ordinary and permanent office-bearers in the Church above presbyters and deacons, having exclusively in their hands the "power of ordination" and the "power of jurisdiction." (Vol.2, p.263-4)

In other words, the difference asserted by the Episcopalian theory between the order of bishops and the order of presbyters is exhibited in the right belonging to bishops, and not to presbyters, of ordaining to office in the Church and further, in the power of appertaining to bishops and not to presbyters, of exercising government and administering discipline in the Christian society.

2. Independancy: Each separate congregation is under Christ subject to no external jurisdiction. All things are

local.

Congregational Independency (Baptist, Congregationalism)
Representative Independency (Reformed Baptist)

3. Presbyterianism: Representative government that enjoy jurisdictional/ecclesiastical connectedness to other churches within same denomination. Some things are originally local; some are general. Even originally local matters may become general, through review, complaint, or appeal.

7. Questions that illustrate why one form of government is more biblical than others.

1. Biblically, are doctrinal matters local or general? Acts 15. Does the church at Antioch settle the issue of the status of Gentiles in the NT church, or is this issue settled by a general council?

2. Biblically, are disciplinary matters local or general? 1 Cor. 5. Does Paul remove the sinning individual from Corinth, or does he require the Corinthians to remove him?

3. Biblically, are diaconal matters local or general? 1 Cor. 16. Are the saints at Galatia and Corinth responsible for the relief of saints at Jerusalem, or is such relief the responsibility of the Jerusalem saints?

4. Biblically, are missionary matters local or general? 2 Cor. 8. Did the Macedonians' gift to Paul contribute to "ministering to the saints" only in Macedonia or elsewhere as well, and does Paul exhort the Corinthians to abound in this grace also? Similarly, did the Philippians contribute to Paul's sustenance as a minister only while he was in Phillipi, or when he was in Thessalonica also (Phil. 4)?

8. WCF Applied: *Arguments and Argumentative Fallacies: A Primer for Church Officers* T. David Gordon

- I. The Big Issue: Distinguishing matters of principle from matters of expediency.
- II. Why we argue or deliberate.
- III. How we argue and deliberate.

9. WCF 31 Applied: *BCO Review*

Church Courts

1-5. Ecclesiastical jurisdiction is not a several, but a joint power, to be exercised by presbyters in courts. These courts may have jurisdiction over one or many churches, but they sustain such mutual relations as to realize the idea of the unity of the Church.

3-2. Ecclesiastical power, which is wholly spiritual, is twofold. The officers exercise it sometimes severally, as in preaching the Gospel, administering the Sacraments, reproofing the erring, visiting the sick, and comforting the afflicted, which is the power of order; and they exercise it sometimes jointly in Church courts, after the form of judgment, which is the power of jurisdiction.

3-5. The Church, with its ordinances, officers and courts, is the agency which Christ has ordained for the edification and government of His people, for the propagation of the faith, and for the evangelization of the world.

10-1. The Church is governed by various courts, in regular gradation, which are all, nevertheless, Presbyteries, as being composed exclusively of presbyters.

NOTE: The "idea" of a multi-congregational, one church concept implicit to the idea of "presbytery"

On the theological "idea" of presbytery— something that may help you communicate our "Multi-congregational" concept is to remember that while the use of "presbytery" in our current PCA context has become synonymous with the middle court (between session and GA), its term historically was less attached to a specific expression of presbytery (local, regional, national, etc) as to a "brilliant" (if I may per our tradition) theological concept, nicely summarized by Clowney as the "multi-form single church." Where is this in our confession?— compare WCF 31 to

then BCO 10-1.

10-1. The Church is governed by various courts, in regular gradation, which are all, nevertheless, Presbyteries, as being composed exclusively of presbyters (elders).

In other words, GA is a “General presbytery of North America,” our Southern New England “presbytery” is a “regional presbytery for the states of CT, RI, MA and CPC Session is a “presbytery” of the congregation that meets at Whitney Ave, New Haven... etc.

Now the brilliance of “presbytery” is the organic (as in submission one to another... “organized” in the sense of an “organized church”) union that exists between otherwise different culturally identified congregations (socio-economic, ethnic, geo-political, etc). In other words by presbyterial organic union, “the” church (one) is enabled to BOTH respect our common theological values/confessions (Five Marks for instance as within the WCF confessional context) AND respect the “socio-cultural flesh” (per our sacramental principle especially) across multiple socio-cultural context that are more times than not the impetus for schism. IN other words, to allow for a genuinely organic union (1Cor per Clowney) under one organization (otherwise unity is lost to voluntary-participation as suits the individual congregation) such as to share in the “elements of confession, sacramental worship, communal mercy/government, mission and gospel while at the same time respecting the cultural manners (that too often become barriers to organic union) in which these elements are most powerfully experienced in a given cultural context. (don’t tag me grammatically on this one :)

So having “rediscovered” the true missional/theological vision of “presbytery”— we are seeking to plant “presbyteries” as per the various “gradations” wherever we go... AND, per the wisdom of “presbytery”— it allows the “global” (elemental aspects— 5 Marks...) to be authentically worked out without loss of ecumenical unity across “formal” (“local” socio-cultural aspects)_ identities without schism— exactly what horribly plagues the modern church today and perhaps more than any other issue is the contagion that renders our witness to the authenticity of Christ and the gospel repugnant to the watching world. To be sure, by permission of our savior, the world (rightly) judges us in so far as our congregations are most distinguished not by our gospel centered creed as to say “there is therefore no distinction” (in words) even while our unity is organically more an expression of our various socio-political-economic- political orientations (c.f Robert Wuthnow study of the American Church in The Restructuring of American Religion. We want to be intentional about real organic unity— and the “submit one to another” spirituality that this entails- and for a better witness to the non-sectarian lordship of Christ or his “universal lordship.”

Our goal then is to explore the true meaning of presbytery as we seek to grow the church in Southern CT... thus the multi-congregational vision (for lack of a better name). So how to communicate this within a denomination wherein many (if not most) have lost the “concept” of presbytery and think only in a reductionistic and current concrete expression of “presbytery?” We could call it “New Haven Presbytery” but then this would involve a process wherein we would pull out of SNE presbytery.. Again, what once would have been a “synod” in the pre-20th century context.

10-2. These courts are church Sessions, Presbyteries, and the General Assembly.

11-1. These assemblies are altogether distinct from the civil magistracy, and have no jurisdiction in political or civil affairs. They have no power to inflict temporal pains and penalties, but their authority is in all respects moral or spiritual.

11-2. The jurisdiction of Church courts is only ministerial and declarative, and relates to the doctrines and precepts of Christ, to the order of the Church, and to the exercise of discipline.

First, they can make no laws binding the conscience; but may frame symbols of faith, bear testimony against error in doctrine and immorality in practice, within or without the Church, and decide cases of conscience.

Secondly, they have power to establish rules for the government, discipline, worship, and extension of the Church, which must be agreeable to the doctrines relating thereto contained in the Scriptures, the circumstantial details only of these matters being left to the Christian prudence and wisdom of Church officers and courts.

Thirdly, they possess the right to require obedience to the laws of Christ. Hence, they admit those qualified to sealing ordinances and to their respective offices, and they exclude the disobedient and disorderly from such offices or from sacramental privileges. The highest censure to which their authority extends is to cut off the contumacious and impenitent from the congregation of believers. Moreover, they possess all the administrative authority necessary to give effect to these powers.

11-3. All Church courts are one in nature, constituted of the same elements, possessed inherently of the same kinds of rights and powers, and differing only as the Constitution may provide. When, however, according to Scriptural example, and needful to the purity and harmony of the whole Church, disputed matters of doctrine and order arising in the lower courts are referred to the higher courts for decision, such referral shall not be so exercised as to impinge upon the authority of the lower court.

11-4. For the orderly and efficient dispatch of ecclesiastical business, it is necessary that the sphere of action of each court should be distinctly defined. The Session exercises jurisdiction over a single church, the Presbytery over what is common to the ministers, Sessions, and churches within a prescribed district, and the General Assembly over such matters as concern the whole Church. The jurisdiction of these courts is limited by the express provisions of the Constitution.

Every court has the right to resolve questions of doctrine and discipline seriously and reasonably proposed, and in general to maintain truth and righteousness, condemning erroneous opinions and practices which tend to the injury of the peace, purity, or progress of the Church. Although each court exercises exclusive original jurisdiction over all matters especially belonging to it, the lower courts are subject to the review and control of the higher courts, in regular gradation. These courts are not separate and independent tribunals, but they have a mutual relation, and every act of jurisdiction is the act of the whole Church performed by it through the appropriate organ.

The Church Session

12-1. The church Session consists of the pastor, associate pastor(s), if there be any, and the ruling elders of a church. If there are three or more ruling elders, the pastor and two ruling elders shall constitute a quorum. If there are fewer than three ruling elders, the pastor and one ruling elder shall constitute a quorum. Assistant pastor or pastors, although not members of the Session, may be invited to attend and participate in discussion without vote.

When a church has no pastor and there are five or more ruling elders, three shall constitute a quorum; if there are less than five ruling elders, two shall constitute a quorum; if there is only one ruling elder, he does not constitute a Session, but he should take spiritual oversight of the church, should represent it at Presbytery, should grant letters of dismission, and should report to the Presbytery any matter needing the action of a Church court.

Any Session, by a majority vote of its members, may fix its own quorum, provided that it is not smaller than the quorum stated in these paragraphs.

12-2. The pastor is, by virtue of his office, the moderator of the Session. In his absence, if any emergency should arise requiring immediate action, the Session may elect one of its members to preside. Should prudential reasons at any time make it advisable for a minister other than the pastor to preside, the pastor may, with the concurrence of the Session, invite a minister of the same Presbytery to perform this service.

12-3. When a church is without a pastor, the moderator of the Session may be either a minister appointed for that purpose by the Presbytery, with consent of the Session, or one invited by the Session to preside on a particular occasion, or one of its own members elected to preside. In judicial cases, the moderator shall be a minister of the Presbytery to which the church belongs.

12-4. Associate or assistant pastors may substitute for the pastor as moderator of the Session at the discretion of the pastor and Session.

12-5. The church Session is charged with maintaining the spiritual government of the church, for which purpose it has power:

- a. To inquire into the knowledge, principles and Christian conduct of the church members under its care; to censure those found delinquent; to see that parents do not neglect to present their children for Baptism; to receive members into the communion of the Church; to remove them for just cause; to grant letters of dismissal to other churches, which when given to parents, shall always include the names of their non-communing, baptized children;
- b. To examine, ordain, and install ruling elders and deacons on their election by the church, and to require these officers to devote themselves to their work; to examine the records of the proceedings of the deacons; to approve and adopt the budget;
- c. To approve actions of special importance affecting church property;
- d. To call congregational meetings when necessary; to establish and control Sunday schools and Bible classes with special reference to the children of the church; to establish and control all special groups in the church such as Men in the Church, Women in the Church and special Bible study groups; to promote world missions; to promote obedience to the Great Commission in its totality at home and abroad; to order collections for pious uses;
- e. To exercise, in accordance with the Directory for Worship, authority over the time and place of the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments, over all other religious services, over the music in the services, and over the uses to which the church building and associated properties may be put; to take the oversight of the singing in the public worship of God; to ensure that the Word of God is preached only by such men as are sufficiently qualified (*BCO* 4-4, 53-2, 1 Timothy 2:11-12); to assemble the people for worship when there is no minister; to determine the best measures for promoting the spiritual interests of the church and congregation;
- f. To observe and carry out the lawful injunctions of the higher courts; and to appoint representatives to the higher courts, who shall, on their return, make report of their diligence.

12-6. The Session shall hold stated meetings at least quarterly. Moreover, the pastor has power to convene the Session when he may judge it requisite; and he shall always convene it when requested to do so by any two of the ruling elders. When there is no pastor, it may be convened by two ruling elders. The Session shall also convene when directed so to do by the Presbytery.

12-7. Every Session shall keep an accurate record of its proceedings, which record shall be submitted at least once in every year to the inspection of the Presbytery.

12-8. Every Session shall keep an accurate record of baptisms, of communing members, of non-communing members, and of the deaths and dismissions of church members.

12-9. Meetings of the Sessions shall be opened and closed with prayer

Presbytery

13-1. The Presbytery consists of all the teaching elders and churches within its bounds that have been accepted by the Presbytery. When the Presbytery meets as a court it shall comprise all teaching elders and ruling elders as elected by their Session. Each congregation is entitled to two (2) ruling elder representatives for the first 350 communing members or fraction thereof, and one additional ruling elder for each additional 500 communing members or fraction thereof.

13-9. The Presbytery has power to receive and issue* appeals, complaints, and references brought before it in an orderly manner. In cases in which the Session cannot exercise its authority, it shall have power to assume original jurisdiction. It has power:

- a. To receive under its care candidates for the ministry; to examine and license candidates for the holy ministry; to receive, dismiss, ordain, install, remove and judge ministers;

- b. To review the records of church Sessions, redress whatever they may have done contrary to order and take effectual care that they observe the Constitution of the Church;
- c. To establish the pastoral relation and to dissolve it at the request of one or both of the parties, or where the interest of religion imperatively demands it;
- d. To set apart evangelists to their proper work; to require ministers to devote themselves diligently to their sacred calling and to censure the delinquent;
- e. To see that the lawful injunctions of the higher courts are obeyed;
- f. To condemn erroneous opinions which injure the purity or peace of the Church; to visit churches for the purpose of inquiring into and redressing the evils that may have arisen in them; to unite or divide churches, at the request of the members thereof; to form and receive new churches; to take special oversight of churches without pastors; to dissolve churches; to dismiss churches with their consent;
- g. To devise measures for the enlargement of the Church within its bounds; in general, to order whatever pertains to the spiritual welfare of the churches under its care;
- h. And, finally, to propose to the Assembly such measures as may be of common advantage to the Church at large.

General Assembly

14-1. The General Assembly is the highest court of this Church, and represents in one body all the churches thereof. It bears the title of The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, and constitutes the bond of union, peace and correspondence among all its congregations and courts.

Principles for the Organization of the Assembly:

1. The Church is responsible for carrying out the Great Commission.
2. The initiative for carrying out the Great Commission belongs to the Church at every court level, and the Assembly is responsible to encourage and promote the fulfillment of this ministry by the various courts.
3. The work of the Church as set forth in the Great Commission is one work, being implemented at the General Assembly level through equally essential committees.
4. It is the responsibility of every member and every member congregation to support the whole work of the denomination as they be led in their conscience held captive to the Word of God.
5. It is the responsibility of the General Assembly to evaluate needs and resources, and to act on priorities for the most effective fulfillment of the Great Commission.
6. The Church recognizes the right of individuals and congregations to labor through other agencies in fulfilling the Great Commission.
7. The Assembly's committees are to serve and not to direct any Church judicatories. They are not to establish policy, but rather execute policy established by the General Assembly.

14-6. The General Assembly shall have power:

- a. To receive and issue* all appeals, references, and complaints regularly brought before it from the lower courts; to bear testimony against error in doctrine and immorality in practice, injuriously affecting the Church; to decide in all controversies respecting doctrine and discipline;
- b. To give its advice and instruction, in conformity with the Constitution, in all cases submitted to it;
- c. To review the records of the Presbyteries, to take care that the lower courts observe the Constitution; to redress whatever they may have done contrary to order;
- d. To devise measures for promoting the prosperity and enlargement of the Church;
- e. To erect new Presbyteries, and unite and divide those which were erected with their consent;
- f. To institute and superintend the agencies necessary in the general work of evangelization; to appoint ministers of such labors as fall under its jurisdiction;
- g. To suppress schismatical contentions and disputations, according to the rules provided therefor;
- h. To receive under its jurisdiction, with the consent of three-fourths (3/4) of the Presbyteries, other ecclesiastical bodies whose organization is conformed to the doctrine and order of this Church; to authorize Presbyteries to

exercise similar power in receiving bodies suited to become constituents of those courts, and lying within their geographical bounds respectively;

- i. To superintend the affairs of the whole Church;
- j. To correspond with other churches; to unite with other ecclesiastical bodies whose organization is conformed to the doctrines and order of this Church, such union to be effected by a mode of procedure defined in *BCO 26*; and
- k. In general to recommend measures for the promotion of charity, truth and holiness through all the churches under its care.

Rule of Assembly Operations

4-1. The affairs and programs of the General Assembly shall be conducted primarily through its Permanent Committees and Agencies.

4-2. The Permanent Committees are those specifically created by the *Book of Church Order*:

- Administrative Committee (AC)
- Christian Education and Publications (CE&P)
- Mission to the World (MTW)
- Mission to North America (MNA)
- Reformed University Ministries (RUM)

4-3. The Agencies are:

- Covenant Theological Seminary
- Covenant College
- Ridge Haven Conference Center
- PCA Retirement & Benefits, Inc.
- PCA Foundation

The relationship of the Agencies to the Assembly remains as a committee although they may be incorporated separately for civil purposes. The composition and responsibilities of the Agencies are set forth in the Bylaws.

4-4. The Special Committees are:

- Interchurch Relations Committee
- Committee on Constitutional Business
- Nominating Committee
- Committee on Review of Presbytery Records
- Theological Examining Committee

Addendum 1: The Missional Necessity of Synods/Counsels as distinguished from Church "Boards" (extra-ecclesial)

History of Church Boards

Historical Background in American Presbyterianism:

The two most prominent questions relating to the church in the 1850's pertained to the general topics of church polity and mission. The question with respect to church polity dealt primarily with the nature and office of the eldership.²³ Yet most attention was given to what the *Presbyterial Critic* called "The Church Question."²⁴ The controversy pertained to the existence of independent church boards as agents of the church, yet not accountable to the church courts directly, for accomplishing the gospel mandate to "make disciples"²⁵. In the controversy surrounding the "church question", the editors of the *Critic* (Thomas Peck and Stuart Robinson) had unmistakably aligned themselves with the positions championed by James Henley Thornwell in the *Southern Presbyterian Review* over against Princeton theologian Charles Hodge and *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*²⁶ In an article entitled "Suggestions Touching the Presbyterian System for Spreading the Gospel," some of the "great aspects of the Presbyterian premise" were clearly expounded upon by the *Critic* in relation to this controversy²⁷

"First. The Church of Christ is a missionary association by the very law of its existence.... To suppose any necessity for another, and a distinct association or organization of men for these purposes is to suppose an absurdity... The creation of the original organization for its own ends is sufficient. To demand another to carry out its purposes, is absurd. Hence, the Church alone, is the great authorized source for the extension of the means of grace, and the knowledge of salvation.

Second. We remark that the Church has been furnished with all the means, agents and powers, necessary to the accomplishment of her ends, and that these are the best adapted of all conceivable methods for this purpose. The Church is an organized and finished kingdom. To deny it is to impeach the wisdom of her Head: it is to declare him guilty of the folly of organizing an institution for the attainment of an end, and yet leaving it unequipped with the officers necessary to attain it... that the order which God had imposed, in the organization of His visible Church, was far the best for the attainment of its ends. The very foolishness of God, is wiser than men, in this as in other things.

Third. ... the order of the Church is not only adapted to its ends: but it is paramount. ..

Therefore, according to the *Critic* "The radical difference: In the Last Analysis of the Church Question" was between those who "exalt the logical element in Religion, to an equality with -- or even a supremacy over, the supernatural element" as compared to those who do "away then with all human trust, all human contrivances. With a doctrine taught of God, an order revealed by him, an efficiency communicated from him, a mission entrusted to us of him; all carnal devices of whatever kind are at once a hindrance to us, and an insult to the Majesty of Heaven. God has laid for himself the model of his kingdom."²⁸ In yet another article published in the

²³See *Critic*, "A Glance at the Present Position of Eldership of the Presbyterian Church" 2:66.

²⁴ "The Church Question" *Critic*, June, 1855, Vol.1, No.6 p.245ff

²⁵Matthew 28:16ff

²⁶For example: See "The Church Question" *Critic*, June, 1855, Vol.1, No.6 p.245ff (Response to VIIIth Article in the *Biblical Repertory* for April, 1855 "The Truth and the Life" on the Theology of Princeton on the "Church Question".) Also see, "The General Assembly of 1854" (*Critic*, Feb. 1855, p. 86ff) which responded to the way in which the *Biblical Repertory* reviewed the 1854 Assembly.

Of particular interest to the *Critic* was the way in which the *Repertory* downplayed the issues relating to church boards. "The argument has been that the boards are simply "committees" of the church" and therefore not objectionable to Presbyterianism. "Thus, on the one hand, it is asserted, (*Repertory*) 'It seems, indeed, unworthy of debate, whether the body, be called a Committee, and be appointed by the Assembly, or whether it be called a Board. In the one case, it would be a small body, in the other, large.' This we take to mean that the Board, as now organized, is simply a large committee of the Assembly, nothing else, and it is "unworthy of debate", whether a Committee be large or small. But have the advocates of simple Committees never made any other demand than simply a smaller board.? The *Repertory* need not be reminded that a Committee, constituted of Presidents and Vice-Presidents, under charter of incorporation, a committee in which membership may be bought for thirty dollars, and "directorship," (a singular function in a committee man,) for fifty dollars, is something out of the usual order of a Committee of a church court... Now it is plain, that after thus comparing the several descriptions here given of Boards, the first and most difficult question to decide, is whether the Board be a Committee or not? Nor is this an unimportant question, since in this is involved the question, is "the church a missionary society?"-- competent in her organized capacity and provided in her Constitution, with all the agencies for carrying on her work. Or is the Presbyterian Church, in this respect, no better off than the Independency, out of the defects of which grow up voluntary Societies. This is the true issue involved in the old controversy between voluntary societies and Ecclesiastical Boards.... If so, then, the boards are something extra to the system of our church, and but a white-washed, --or, rather, faintly blue-washed variety of the voluntary society; and then the whole question involved in the controversy of 1835 to 1838, would "seem to be, indeed, unworthy of debate."

²⁷ "Suggestions Touching the Presbyterian System for Spreading the Gospel," *Critic*, August, '55, p. 361ff

²⁸ "The Radical Difference: In the last analysis of the Church Question" March, 1855, 3:111; and written by R. L. Breckinridge

Presbyterial Critic, a good summary of the arguments against church boards was furnished.

1. All Ecclesiastical Boards, strictly speaking are based upon the principle of Independency-- they have no permanent internal bond of concert and union, with each other."
2. In a system like Presbyterianism, such Boards, are like two powers, inconsistent with each other, placed in the same machine... Their principles, and the principles of the Church, never can be in active exercise at the same time-- without conflict.
3. The best and most natural defense of ecclesiastical boards (as opposed to independent boards) as connected with our church courts, is that they are strictly speaking, commissions of the church courts, say of the GA. A commission is different from a committee, mainly in this, that the latter examines and reports, the former examines and concludes..
- 4 And we desire that if church action shall be substituted for Board action; that it shall be substituted directly, in every case, where it may be conveniently, wisely, and profitably so substituted; and that it shall be substituted indirectly as a church action through Boards, instead of a Board action through and upon the Church, (if the name, Board, must be retained."²⁹...

The Critic then summarized its position in the following way,
Why should we mar, by our foolish additions, the workmanship of infinite wisdom? He has committed to his church, as his church, the means of saving the world: why should she with an imbecility at once faithless and presumptuous, confessing herself an all-sufficient counselor, turn over to others, no matter to whom, her own appropriate, nay her express work? The germ of all apostasy is concealed in the defection. For if the objects set before God's people are not addressed to their faith, they come with no obligation to his church: but if they do address themselves to our faith, they specifically appertain to the kingdom of Messiah. In the one case we divest the sacred investiture of Christ; in the other we substitute as his, the commandments of men. In either case a principle is enthroned in the bosom of the church, which is sufficient if fully acted out, to remove every land-mark established by God, and to bring in every invention ever devised by man. It is a defection whose principle covers the totality of revealed religion. For the instant we settle it, as the mind of God, that the office of his church is not to do his work, but to see it done; then the whole position of the church as well towards God and his people as toward this guilty world, is utterly changed from the ground on which the Apostles, the Confessors, and the Reformers have all place it. But until this be done, there is an end of all reason by which to justify the least departure from the simplicity of Faith."³⁰

The result of the debate was not only to reaffirm "Jure Divino" ecclesiology to affirm the church as a sufficient and essential element of the Gospel whose mission was exclusively spiritual in the making of disciples.
Relevance Today/

Addendum 2: Everyone a Minister?

No Pastoral Office or "Everyone A Minister"

As quoted by Ian Murray, Paul Benjamin celebrates that "the idea of every Christian being a minister of Christ is finally dawning upon the American mind. During a long night, growth has been thwarted by the 'one minister — one congregation' concept of ministry.³¹ The view is expressed by Marjorie Warkentin Paul Stevens, Richard Hanson, Frank Viola, Harold Camping, F. W. Grant, Alexander Hay, and a whole host of others.³² It is a view perhaps most brazenly, expressed by Frank Viola who argues with others that the concept of clergy and ordination stem from the fall as influenced through history by pagan practices.

²⁹"More Boards in the Presbyterian Church--Some Inquiry into Fundamental Principles" *Critic*, May, '55 p.97f)

³⁰ibid

³¹ Paul Benjamin, *The Equipping Ministry* (Standard Publishing: Cincinnati, 1978), pp. 15—16. Quoted in Ian Murray, *The Problem of the Eldership*.

³² C.f. Marjorie Warkentin, *Ordination: A Biblical-Historical View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) Harold Camping's, *The End of the Church... and After*, Frank Viola, *Rethinking the Wineskin*, (Brandon: Present Testimony Ministry, 2001) F.W. Grant, *Nicolaitanism or the Rise and Growth of Clerisy* (Bedford: MWTB) Walter Klassen, "New Presbyter is Old Priest Writ Large," *Concern* 17, 1969, p. 5. See also W. Klassen, J.L. Burkholder, and John Yoder, *The Relation of Elders to the Priesthood of Believers* (Washington: Sojourner's Book Service, 1969).

With the fall came an implicit desire in man to have a physical leader to bring him to God. For this reason, human societies throughout history have consistently created a special spiritual caste of religious icons. The medicine man, the shaman, the rhapsodist, the miracle worker, the witch-doctor, the soothsayer, the wise-man, and the priest have all been with us since Adam's blunder.

He further states:

The Pastor is the dominating focal point, mainstay, and centerpiece of the modern church. He is the embodiment of Protestant Christianity. But here is the profound irony. There is not a single verse in the entire NT that supports the existence of the modern day Pastor! He simply did not exist in the early church. ³³

Observations:

- It is merely a reinstatement of the classic Anabaptist position, and is of course increasingly popular given the democratization of ministry that has accompanied the post-enlightenment American context.³⁴
- The biblical difficulties are:
 - the failure to treat seriously the biblical case against self-appointed and unauthorized ministry of word and sacrament, which then begs for some means of authorization after some established pattern of sound doctrine and piety. (2 Peter 2:1-2, 2 John 1:10, Titus 1:11, Jude).
 - Paul warns the church that there will be many who will want to be teachers/pastors who will not be qualified (1Tim.1:7). How then are they to be qualified if not ordained or "set apart" to the office?
 - Those who do teach are exhorted to teach according to a "standard of sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1, 2 Tim.1:13). Who determines the standard?
 - And evidently, this "standard" was according to the principle of succession passed down by the apostles (2Tim.2:2).
 - The biblical language of "appoint" used to describe the authorization process and applied to the office of *episkopos* especially (bishops/pastor) even while being named among the "elders" (*presbuteros*).³⁵
 - The "laying on of hands" ceremony that was first instituted by the apostles in Acts 8:18 and continued by the presbytery (1Tim.4:14 and 2Tim.1:6),

Therefore, whereas the scripture will recognize the propriety of believers to encourage and instruct one another in an unauthorized manner (Heb. 10:24), we also discover that not all Christians are called to teach and preach on behalf of the church, even as there was a means used by the church to distinguish between those who were and were not authorized to teach. This distinction between lay exhortation and the authorized ministry of the word was well articulated by Jonathan Edwards in the seventeenth century for instance:

Teaching is spoken of in Scripture as an act of authority (1 Tim. 2:12). In order to a man's preaching, special authority must be committed to him, (Rom. 10:15) "How shall they preach except they be sent?" No man but a minister duly appointed to that sacred calling ought to follow teaching and exhorting as a calling, or so as to neglect that which is proper calling. Having an office of a teacher in the church of God implies two things: 1. As being invested with the authority of a teacher; and 2. As being called to the business of a teacher to make it the business of his life. Therefore, that man who is not a minister, taking either of these upon him, invades the office of a minister. It will be a very dangerous thing for lay-men, in either of these respects to invade the office of a minister. If this be common among us, we shall be in danger of having a stop put to the work of God.³⁶

³³ From an article excerpted from Frank Viola, *Pagan Christianity: The Origins of Our Modern Church Practices*. Article can be read at www.ptmin.org/pagan/htm

³⁴ For the historic Anabaptist view, see J.L. Ainslie, *The Doctrines of Ministerial Order in the Reformed Churches of the 16th and 17th Centuries* (Edinburgh, 1940). As applied today, see Peter Hoover's *The Secret of the Strength: What Would the Anabaptists Tell This Generation?* (Shippensburg: Benchmark Press, 1998)

³⁵ c.f. Acts 20:28, Titus 1:5, 1Cor.12:28, 2Cor.5:19, 1tim.12, 1tim.2:7, 2Tim.1:11.

³⁶ Jonathan Edwards, "Of errors connected with lay-exhorting" *Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Banner of Truth Edition) Vol. 2, p. 417.

