

The Presbyterian Form Of Church Government

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If we are imbued with Christian discernment we cannot but be impressed with the inclusiveness, the sublimity, the beauty of the word which Paul penned in his first epistle to Timothy: “And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness, He who was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory” (I Timothy 3:16). “The mystery of godliness” means the grand mystery of redemptive revelation, the mystery par excellence of the Christian faith. The ultimate mystery of being is, of course, the truth of the trinity of persons in the unity of the Godhead. This mystery would have engaged the thought and constrained the adoration of mankind if there had been no sin and therefore no need for or fact of redemption. The supreme delight of man as sinless and confirmed in holiness would have been the contemplation of the glory of the triune God, and man’s supreme blessedness would have consisted in the fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But if there had been no sin there would never have been the mystery of godliness—there would have been no incarnation and no preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles. There would have been no need for the gospel of the incarnate, resurrected and glorified Lord. The mystery of godliness is the revelation of

the wisdom, love and grace of God in the provisions of redemption.

In respect of succinctness and richness no passage in the New Testament surpasses this definition of our holy faith. But the significance attaching to the occasion on which this sublime utterance was penned frequently escapes us. Scripture is not a compilation of particular and unrelated oracular pronouncement; Scripture is an organism. Hence we must pay attention to the context in which this word appears. “These things write I unto you”, etc. (I Timothy 3:14–15). The controlling interest of the apostle in this passage is jealousy for proper behaviour in the church of God. And this jealousy is constrained by the consideration that the church is the pillar and ground of the truth.

If the church is the house of God and the pillar and ground of the truth, then it follows that whatever interferes with proper behaviour in the church directly prejudices the testimony to the truth of which the church is the pillar and ground. The sequence of the apostle’s thought here is plainly to the effect that there is an unbreakable bond between behaviour in the church and the maintenance of the truth which finds its epitome in the word, “He who was manifested in the flesh”, etc. There can be no disjunction between the truth which

constitutes our holy faith and the church as the pillar and ground of this truth. There can be no disjunction between Christ and his church because the church is the body of which he is the head. And if there is no possibility of making such a disjunction it follows that effective promotion of the truth of the gospel, effective testimony to Jesus as being himself the mystery of godliness, is bound up indissolubly with proper behaviour in the church which is his body.

We must ask then: what is the behaviour that is consonant with the church as the house of God and the pillar and ground of the truth? In the history of the church a great deal of the thinking on this question has been governed by the assumption that this is a matter for human discretion, sense of propriety, and considerations of convenience and expediency. No doubt Timothy was equipped with a good measure of discretion. But Paul does not assume that he should rely upon his sense of propriety in this matter: "These things write I unto you...that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God". In this epistle we have sufficient examples of the detailed prescriptions which are directly concerned with behaviour in the church of God. And it is not without relevance to remember that Paul in his second epistle to Timothy accords to Scripture the rule by

which the man of God is to be furnished unto every good work.

Since we are now interested in the government of the church of Christ, there are two questions that arise. Does government belong to the category of behaviour in the church of God? If so, what is this government?

1. The Fact of Government

The church is the body of Christ. There are two considerations bearing upon the church as the body of Christ which place beyond dispute the institution which is properly called government. The first consideration is that Christ is the head (Ephesians 4:15; 5:23; Colossians 1:18; 2:19). Implied is the supreme hegemony which Christ exercises in that capacity, and here at the outset we have not only the fact of subjection to Christ (Ephesians 5:24) but also the primary and the basic principle. It may appear a platitude to assert this truth of Christ's supreme hegemony. But the history of these our British Isles is evidence of the lamentable extent to which the implications of this basic tenet have been discarded. Any attempt at government in the church of Christ which does not recognise and apply the sole headship of Christ is one which at the outset

violates the first principle of the church of Christ. The sole headship of Christ involves the regulative principle that in the government of Christ's church as well as in its worship we are to be directed by the prescriptions of Christ and therefore by the intimations of his will as revealed to us in the Scriptures.

The second consideration is that the hegemony which Christ's headship involves does not eliminate the instrumentality by which Christ exercises this government. Christ does not now by his own physical presence nor by any direct revelatory intrusion regulate the affairs of the church. It is noteworthy that it is in connection with the concept of the church as the body of Christ, a concept devoid of all meaning except as Christ is viewed as the head, that the apostle Paul introduces the fact of government as ministered by men. It is diversity in unity, so apparent in the organism of the body, that supplies the basis for the differentiation which government presupposes. "For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. And having gifts differing according to the grace which has been given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the

proportion of faith; or ministry, let us wait on our ministry; or he that teacheth on teaching; or he that exhorteth, on exhortation; he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness” (Romans 12:4–8). The same appears in I Corinthians 12:24–31 where, in connection with the unity and diversity belonging to the body of Christ, we have an enumeration of offices and functions among which “governments” are accorded a place (cf I Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:7). We thus see that “rulership” (Romans 12:8) and “governments” (I Corinthians 12:28) belong to that institution which is apostolic and hence government is one of the distinguishing gifts bestowed and functions discharged co-ordinate with those others specified in these passages.

It is all the more remarkable that in I Corinthians 12:28 the reference to government should occur in conjunction with mention of the apostolic office. It is apparent that to the apostolate was given unique authority in the church of Christ. To the apostolate was given in a pre-eminent sense the keys of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 16:19). We might be ready to judge that in view of the presence of apostles in the apostolic age the exercise of government by others than the apostles would not

only be unnecessary but presumptuous. But the reference to specific gifts for government shows this to be not the case. We have already noted that the supreme hegemony of Christ as the head of the church does not make subordinate and delegated authority dispensable. In the same way the unique authority vested in the apostles does not make superfluous the special gifts and functions of government bestowed upon others. The apostles were not ubiquitous, and there were the numberless needs arising in local situations to which it was not possible for the apostles to attend. And we can scarcely fail to discover in these references to the function of government the provision which Christ has made for the regulation and edification of the church to the end of the age.

These explicit references to government establish the principle that to certain persons are given the gifts which equip them for a specific function to be exercised in the church, a function which is called government or rule or oversight as an institution of Christ. Government implies the subjection of those governed to those exercising government. The church of Christ, therefore, does not govern itself. It is not a pure democracy in which the assembly or congregation of the saints determines its own affairs. It might seem to be an inference derived

from the priesthood of all believers that government would be vested in the whole assembly of believers. And it might also seem to be more in accord with the interests of harmony and peace within the assembly of God's people for the people to adjudicate by deliberative vote all matters of government and discipline. But such reasoning violates the institution which investiture with special gifts and with their corresponding functions implies.

2. The Form of Government

When we examine the New Testament there needs to be no question of the fact that those invested with the gift and function of government are called elders. Titus was left in Crete that he might "set in order the things that were lacking and ordain elders in every city" (Titus 1:5). From Miletus Paul sent to Ephesus and called there the elders of the church (Acts 20:17). Peter writes to exhort the elders, as under-shepherds under the arch-shepherd, to shepherd the flock of God (I Peter 5:1 2). That these elders ruled the church is apparent. The elders whom Titus was to ordain in Crete were also called bishops and stewards of God (Titus 1:7). In his charge to the elders at Ephesus Paul says, "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock over which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers" (bishops)

(Acts 20:28). And I Timothy 5:17 makes clear that all elders ruled, though there is the further differentiation that some ruled better than others and some in addition to ruling laboured in the word and doctrine.

There are certain observations to be elicited from these passages and others of kindred character.

I. Plurality

This feature lies on the face of the evidence. Titus was enjoined to ordain elders in every city. He was not instructed to ordain an elder or bishop in every city. Paul called to Miletus the elders of the church and charged them, as a plurality, to shepherd the flock of God. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews writes, "Remember them that have the rule over you" (Hebrews 13:7). This emphasis upon plurality indicates the jealousy with which the New Testament guards against government by one man. The New Testament institution is not, as we have seen, a pure democracy. Neither is it an autocracy. It is the simple truth that singularity has no place in the government of Christ's church. In every case the singularity exemplified in diocesan episcopacy, whether it be in the most extreme form of the papacy or in the most restricted application of

local diocesan bishops, is a patent deviation from, indeed presumptuous contradiction of, the institution of Christ. Plurality is written in the boldest letters in the pages of the New Testament and singularity bears the hallmark of despite to Christ's institution.

It is not for us to question the institution of Christ even when we are unable to discover the reasons for it. But in this instance it is not difficult to see the wisdom and grace of the head of the church. Plurality is a safeguard against the arrogance and tyranny to which man has the most characteristic proclivity. And plurality in this sphere always differentiates the singularity that belongs to Christ and to him alone. It is no wonder that failure to adhere to the plurality that must be maintained in the government of the church has by logical steps resulted in what on all accounts is the greatest travesty ever witnessed in the history of Christendom, namely, the pretensions and blasphemies of the Roman see.

This plurality must be practised in every sphere of jurisdiction. Titus was not only to ordain elders but elders in every city. This is the most distinctive feature of Paul's charge in this connection. Every locality had its own elders. It was not a case of itinerant elders exercising jurisdiction over a large area. We see how rigidly the principle of plurality

was maintained and this provision of plurality in every town accentuates the perversion to which singularity in government has subjected the institution of the New Testament.

II. Parity

The principle of parity is co-ordinate with that of plurality. Strictly speaking there can be no plurality if there is not parity. For if one is in the least degree above the others, then, in respect of that hegemony, there is no longer plurality. Plurality applies to all government of the church and there must therefore be parity in the plurality. There is not the slightest evidence in the New Testament that among the elders there was any hierarchy—the elders exercise government in unison and on a parity with one another. This principle has oftentimes suffered eclipse within the presbyterian fold. It has come to expression within presbyterian churches by entertaining the notion that to the minister of the Word belongs priority or pre-eminence in the government of the church. It is true that the minister as a teaching elder has his own distinctive function in the preaching and teaching of the Word—he labours in the Word and doctrine. It is natural and proper that his knowledge and experience should be given due respect in the deliberations which must

be undertaken by the elders in the exercise of the government of the church. But it cannot be too strongly emphasised that, in respect of ruling, the minister of the Word is on a parity with all the others who are designated elders. When this is discarded, then there ensues that type of clerical hierarchism which has reached its logical outcome in what is known as hierarchical episcopacy and it is the first step in the abandonment of the institution of Christ. Ministers of the Word in presbyterian denominations are not immune to the vice of autocracy and they are too ready to grasp at an authority that does not belong to them. This evil which has marred the witness of churches professing presbyterian government only illustrates the need for constant vigilance lest the elementary principles of presbyterian government be violated and desecrated. It is not only by erroneous theory that presbytery is prejudiced but also by practice which subtly annuls the theory professed.

III. The Episcopacy

It is so obvious that those exercising the ruling function in the New Testament are sometimes called elders and at other times bishops that no elaborate argument is necessary to establish the identity. In Acts 20:17 we read that Paul sent from Miletus to

Ephesus and called the elders of the church. At verse 28 we have the charge given to these elders: “Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops”. Again in Titus 1:5 we read: “For this cause left I thee in Crete...that thou mightest ordain elders in every city.” Then Paul proceeds to give some of the qualifications and states the reason why these qualifications must be blameless as the steward of God (Titus 1:7). It would be senseless to state this reason if the bishop referred to a different office or function. Hence when Paul says to Timothy, “Faithful is the saying, if any one desires the office of a bishop (the episcopacy) he desires a good work” (I Timothy 3:1), he cannot have in mind any other office than is in view in Titus 1:7 where the person designated a bishop has already been identified in Titus 1:5 as an elder.

The term “elder” is not itself indicative or definitive of function; the term “bishop” is and refers expressly to the oversight, supervision, or rulership which defines the function of the elder in the institution of government.

We must, therefore, recognise that in the New Testament the term “bishop” is identical in respect of office and function with that of elder and must not be associated in the remotest way with the hierarchical

denotation or connotation that have come to be attached to it in the course of history. The New Testament institution is presbyterial; it is also episcopal. And these are identical. The principles already enunciated—plurality and parity—apply without any qualification to what the New Testament means by episcopacy.

IV. Local Government

We have found that the kind of government set forth in the New Testament is that of a plurality of elders or bishops exercising oversight on a parity with one another. It is all-important to take account of the fact that it is on the local level that this must, first of all, be applied. It is in the local assembly or congregation of God's people that the ordinances of Christ's appointment for his church are regularly administered. The importance of the local congregation is therefore paramount and it is in the local congregation that the presbyterian principle must first be exemplified. If it is not preserved and practised at this point, it is not in operation at all. If and when it so happens that a particular congregation of God's people is not able, for reasons of geographical isolation or for reasons of loyalty to the whole counsel of God, to establish a broader fellowship with other congregations of like

faith and practice, that congregation must not consider itself pre-empted from discharging all the rights and prerogatives, as well as duties, of presbytery. In the New Testament the presbuterion is simply the elders gathered together for the discharge of those functions of government devolving upon them and no prerogative of presbytery is denied them when acting in that capacity. The presbyterian principle begins at the level of the particular flock or congregation and if for good reasons, it does not extend further than one congregation, we are not to deem it unpresbyterian. To be concrete, to that local presbytery belongs all the functions that Christ has accorded to presbytery.

V. Ecumenical Government

While it is all-important to maintain and promote presbyterian government on the level of the local congregation and to recognise all the rights and prerogatives belonging to this presbuterion, yet it is also necessary to appreciate the broader fellowship that obtains in the church of Christ. In the presbyterian tradition this has come to expression in the gradation of courts of jurisdiction. This is a reasonable and proper way of giving expression to the unity of the church of Christ. It should be recognised that there is much in the form of

organisation and procedure adopted in presbyterian churches that cannot plead the authority of the New Testament. And the reason why certain forms of organisation and procedure have been adopted and practised which cannot plead the prescription or warrant of Scripture itself is simply the recognition that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and government of the church which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence in accord with the general principles of the Word of God. Much in the actual polity of the church falls into this category and we must guard against the notion that differences in the form of organisation and particularly in mode of procedure necessarily violate the biblical principles of presbyterian government. There is much room for variety, and the church of Christ is always under the necessity of devising and adopting better forms of procedure and organisation than those which tradition may have established.

But the main consideration at this point is that the unity of government exemplified in the gradation of courts of jurisdiction is a principle which belongs to the form of government which the New Testament sets forth. In the history of the church several facts have been appealed to in support of this principle of inclusive or expansive jurisdiction. The example of

the Jerusalem council recorded in Acts 15 has been adduced and that not without warrant. Apostolic example has the force of divine prescription. And the church at Antioch, in connection with the dissension that arose concerning circumcision, deemed it proper to send Paul and Barnabas and others to Jerusalem to confer with the apostles and elders about this question. The apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. The decrees that were issued by the council were regarded as having regulative force throughout the whole church. For we read that Paul and Silas on Paul's second missionary journey, as they went through the cities, "delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem" (Acts 16:4).

The consideration, however, that should be deemed primary and basic in this connection is the unity and community of the church as the body of Christ. The local congregation is indeed the church of Christ but so are all the assemblies of God's people. The unity that belongs to the body of Christ must come to expression in government as well as in the other functions which are properly those of the church. That each congregation should be entirely independent in its government is incompatible with the oneness of the body of Christ. "There is one

body and one Spirit, even as ye were called in one hope of your calling: one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in all” (Ephesians 4:4–6). The co-ordination and subordination exemplified in presbyterian churches are the expression in the sphere of government of this unity. In any case, there must be some way of bringing this unity to expression. And the only feasible way is that the whole church should be governed by a presbuterion that will be as widely representative as the church itself. All that is absolutely essential in terms of the New Testament is that government be as inclusive as the whole body. The particular ways of applying this ecumenity of government are but the expedients of Christian prudence in accord with the general principles of the Word.

Conclusion

Some of us are in the happy position of having had our lot cast in a well-established presbyterian tradition. Hence we do not have to begin with the foundation. The reformation and renovation required from time to time concern the superstructure and not the foundation. Others of us are not in that happy situation. The question arises: what is to be done by those who find themselves persuaded of

the divine right of presbytery but who in the geographical situation in which they are placed do not find themselves in a fellowship of churches where the presbyterian institution is professed and applied? I take it that the “Fellowship” under whose auspices we are now meeting is the step taken by certain persons in this country in answer to that question. The “Fellowship” called “The Evangelical Presbyterian Fellowship¹” is of profound significance in the ecclesiastical situation in which you find yourselves in England. Every sound and solid movement must begin with the declaration and propagation of the principles upon which it is founded and which it seeks to promote. These principles, if sound, are the seed sown, and the “Fellowship” is the seed-bed within which the seed sown is to germinate and grow to the end of fruitage in the establishment and promotion of churches of Christ espousing and practising these principles as the institution of the head of the church. It is all-important, however, that we should not rest satisfied with the promulgation of the truth respecting the form of government which Christ has revealed as his will for the church. It is the church that is the pillar and ground of the truth. And there is no church

¹ The Evangelical Fellowship was an association which existed in the late 1950s that shared similar goals with the then Presbyterian Association in England. In 1991 the Association became the EPCEW.

apart from the assembly of God's people in the fulfilment of those ordinances which are the functions of the church as the body of Christ. It is earnestly to be hoped and prayed that from this "Fellowship" may emanate, or, more accurately, from the witness which this "Fellowship" bears and promotes there may arise, a nucleus of people and then a nucleus of congregations of the people of God which will maintain and express the Reformed faith in its integrity and presbyterian polity in its purity and simplicity. And may a little one become a thousand and a small one a great nation.