

CHURCH SERIES – PRESBYTERIAN

“What is a Presbyterian Church?” (Acts 15-16)

The term “Presbyterian” is one that we are familiar with but many do not fully understand the true meaning of the term. There are many churches that even label themselves “Presbyterian” who have no historical or theological right to the title. Some wrongly believe that it simply means that a church is ruled by a board of elders made up of either a group of lay elders or a mixture of lay elders and ordained ministers. However, there are many Reformed Baptist and Plymouth Brethren churches that practice such forms of local church governance but they are not Presbyterian.

Presbyterianism certainly includes the ruling of a local church by a board of elders composed of ordained ministers (also called teaching elders) and lay elders (also called ruling elders) but it is much more than that. The *sine qua non* or essential principle of Presbyterianism is the subordination of the leadership of a group of local churches to a general presbytery or synod, which has the power and duty to oversee the actions of each local church leadership under its jurisdiction. If that is presbytery oversight is removed, then it undermines the very foundation of the Presbyterian system.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF PRESBYTERIANISM

One of the earliest Reformed ecclesiastical systems that emerged in the Reformation was Presbyterianism. It was initially developed and popularised as a rejection of the governance by the episcopal polity of the Roman Church and to a lesser extent the Lutheran model. The name is derived from the Greek word *presbuteros*, which means “elder.” Presbyterianism holds to a form of church government in which a board of elders rules a local church, which consists of both lay people and ordained ministers. The leadership of local congregations are not unaccountable but are subordinated to a general presbytery or synod.

Although Presbyterians believe that their governance model is based on that of the New Testament Church in Acts 15, the doctrinal framework was extensively developed in Geneva under John Calvin and then later introduced to Scotland by John Knox after his period of exile there. It was further refined in the Scots Confession of 1560 and then subsequently by the Westminster Confession. Presbyterianism is still the dominant Reformed branch of Protestant Western Christianity.

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION

The key foundational doctrinal and ecclesiastical creeds for Presbyterians were formulated at the Westminster Assembly, held in London at the behest of the English Parliament (1643 - 49). This Assembly produced the Westminster Confession, along with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. They carefully define the principles of Presbyterian governance as including the oversight of local churches to the higher bodies termed synods or councils,

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. (Chapter 31, Article 31.1)

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. (Chapter 31, Article 31.2)

Presbyterians believe that the Scriptural picture is not one of a great number of totally independent churches, but ecclesiastical authority vested in a presbytery made up of elders from the constituent congregations. Each local church is governed by a body of ordained ministers and elected elders (usually called the session from the Latin *sessio* from *sedere* “to sit”) and is subordinate to a higher assembly of ordained ministers and elders known as the presbytery. These presbyteries are sometimes grouped into a synod, and synods nationwide often join together in a general assembly.

There is, therefore, a Biblically prescribed check and balance in a true Presbyterian system. **Everyone in church leadership is first under authority before being in authority.** Congregational leaders have real authority but also delegated authority, which they are always accountable before God and man in how they exercise. Accountability and authority ultimately flows both from the top down (as higher presbyteries exercise authority over local congregations) and from the bottom up (as all local church leadership offices ultimately owe their elections to individual church members). It is a beautifully balanced system.

The concept of an “independent Presbyterian” church is an oxymoron as much as a “sprinkling Baptist.” Any local church board of elders that deliberately refuses to submit itself to the authority of a general presbytery is not a true Presbyterian one. It may call itself a “Presbyterian church” but it has no historic or theological right to claim the title. As the WCF mandates, “there ought to be such assemblies as are commonly called synods or councils” and these are “an ordinance of God appointed thereunto in His Word.”

BIBLICAL BASIS FOR PRESBYTERIANISM

There are clear biblical principles for the Presbyterian system of Governance:

(1) **BOARD OF ELDERS** – The Lord ordained that the local congregation is to have church officers, “*And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ*” (Eph 4:11:12). He ordained that they are to rule over a church, “*The elders which are among you I exhort... Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind*” (1 Peter 5:1-2; cf. Heb. 13:7). The Greek word translated “*oversight*” here is *episkopeo* means literally to look intensely over the flock as an inspector or a guardian.

Hebrews 13:17 speaks of rulers who must be submitted to by members, “*Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves.*” Paul commands also, “*Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine*” (1 Tim. 5:17).

The local congregation is not to be governed as a democracy in which every individual member has equal powers of oversight and authority. Within the local congregation the powers of spiritual leadership are entrusted to a plurality of men in the Board of Elders consisting of ordained ministers and ruling elders. These men are elected by the members to take the oversight of the spiritual interests the local church had entrusted into their care. This plurality will help ensure that decisions are not self-serving to any single individual, as “*in the multitude of counsellors there is safety*” (Prov. 11:14b). There is no example of one elder or one pastor ruling alone in any NT reference to a congregation but always to a plurality of elders in the ruling leadership (cf. Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 6, 22; 16:4; 20:17, 28; 21:18; Philp. 1:1; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1).

So a Board of Elders is not man’s idea but God’s idea and gift to the church to superintend, watch over, and guard the local congregation. These men are jointly to: spiritually teach the flock and guard it from error (Acts 20:28), make policy and doctrinal decisions about the needs and direction of the church ministries, ordain others (1 Tim. 4:14); oversee the use of church finances, set the right example for members setting an example for all (1 Peter 5:3), exercise discipline (Titus 1:9), and many other tasks. If God gives us a gift like this, evidently we need it and He expects us to use it. The qualifications of an elder or overseer are set out in multiple passages in the Bible (cf. 1 Tim. 3:2-7; Titus 1:6-8). Samuel Miller summarises,

To whatever church our attention is directed in the inspired history, we find in it a plurality of elders; we find the mass of the church members spoken of as under their authority; and while the people are exhorted to submit to their rule, with all readiness and affection, these rulers are commanded, in the name of Christ, to exercise the power vested in them by the great Head of the Church, with firmness and fidelity, and yet with disinterestedness and moderation, so as to promote most effectually, the purity and order of the flock.

(2) LOCAL PRESBYTERIES OR SYNODS – The other great branch of church government in the Presbyterian system is the subordination of the local church leadership to the oversight of a presbytery or synod. A presbytery is made up of ministers and representative elders from the constituent congregations. There may also be theological college professors and retired ministers in the presbytery.

Decisions made at the presbytery level are binding on the local churches in their care. This model emphasizes particularly the unity and interdependence of all local congregations within a particular geographical jurisdiction. The local congregation’s leadership is aided by having the benefit of the combined wisdom of more of the church gathered in a presbytery to deliberate on thorny matters. Such an oversight body also helps prevent any individual member being left solely to the dictates or subjective judgments of leaders at the local congregational level. A member will have theoretically the opportunity to have decisions reviewed by the representatives of the whole denomination.

This system of governance is based on the NT model seen particularly in the decisions of the Jerusalem presbytery or council in Acts 15. In that inspired incident we see modelled the principles to guide us in church governance. We observe the deliberations and decrees of the Council of Jerusalem, which consisted of the leaders of a group of churches, setting forth the

authoritative standards for all the congregations within its jurisdiction. The Council of Jerusalem issued binding “*decrees for to keep*” (Acts 16:4) to all the local churches. The word translated “*decrees*” is the Greek word *dogmata*, which is used to refer to a mandated law. Interestingly, the same Greek word is translated “*decree*” in Luke 2:1 with reference to the law issued by Caesar Augustus mandating all the Roman Empire to be taxed (cf. Acts 17:7; Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:14 for same point that *dogmata* is translated as authoritative law).

So the scope of the Council of Jerusalem’s authority was far wider than merely an advisory role, as they exercised a power of order by commanding other local churches in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia to desist from certain practices. The decree they issued was authoritative, decisive, and binding. The language has to be strained by prejudice to interpret “*to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things*” (Acts 15:28) as merely advisory. These local congregations were clearly bound by the decisions of a higher court. This is the principle that can be undeniably deduced. William Cunningham in his *Historical Theology* notes,

The apostles, whether regarded as inspired and infallible teachers, or merely as ordinary office-bearers, had, it will not be disputed, jurisdiction over the whole church of Christ. Their authority was not confined to any one particular place or district, but extended over the whole church, over all who professed subjection to their Master. And if so, then a Synod or Council of which they were constituent members might be fairly regarded as representing the church, and as thus entitled to exercise over the whole length and breadth of it whatever authority and jurisdiction was in itself right or competent. This is quite sufficient to sanction the use which the more judicious Presbyterians make of the Council at Jerusalem, as countenancing the general idea or principle of courts of review, or of a subordination of courts of ecclesiastical office-bearers—of some assemblies possessed of a wider representative character, and of a corresponding wider jurisdiction than others. It is of course only the general principle or idea that is sanctioned—the general principle or idea of the subordination of one court to another of wider jurisdiction—of the subordination of one church to many churches, or to their representatives. The way in which this general idea is to be followed out and applied may, or rather must, depend much upon external circumstances, upon opportunities, of meeting and organizing; but enough may be fairly deduced from the inspired record of the Council at Jerusalem, if it was really intended to afford instructions in regard to church government in subsequent ages, to show that this general idea may be legitimately applied to the regulation of ecclesiastical affairs.

This model is seen in the unified, accountable order of these churches throughout the NT. Donald Macleod also notes,

From the very beginning the church had a unified, collegial leadership extending to all its congregations. That leadership was directly involved and consulted at every critical point in the development of the emerging people of God: the reception of the Samaritan church (Acts 8:14), Peter’s mission to Cornelius (Acts 11:1ff.) and Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:9). The idea of totally isolated, fully autonomous churches is wholly alien to the New Testament.

Each local congregation within the jurisdiction of the Presbytery has the right to elect its ministers and ruling elders to be represented by these men at all levels of church government (Acts 1:21-26 and Acts 6:1-6 are real examples of congregational involvement). These men are called to act independently according to their conscience. Louis Berkhoff reminds, “While the elders are chosen by the people, they do not receive their authority from the people, but directly from Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Church.”

There is no hierarchy within a Presbytery between the ordained ministers and ruling elders. Both are equal as to their rights and powers in all ecclesiastical courts of the Presbytery. In Acts 15:6 the apostles and elders came jointly together to deliberate on this issue referred up to them “*about this question*” (Acts 15:2) from the church in Antioch.

If the apostles were really trying to teach the doctrine of the independence of local churches, they adopted a very strange model to resolve this dispute. For if there was ever a local church that had the ability to resolve theological disputes, surely Antioch was the place as it had as one of its Board of Elders the inspired Apostle Paul, who is widely regarded as the greatest theologian of his generation. Although Paul was an apostle with inspired authority (fully equal to the power of the others as he forcefully argued in Galatians 1:11-2:14), it is notable that he agreed to submit the question from the powerful church at Antioch to the deliberations and decisions of the Jerusalem council, which included the leaders of the church at Antioch and non-apostolic elders. This set a precedent that underlined the unity and interdependence of all local congregations within the NT apostolic jurisdiction. Indeed, it is hard to think of an example that is more contrary to the notion of self-governing, autonomous local churches than this one!

CONCLUSION

The unity and catholicity of the early church is a constant theme in the NT narrative. It reflects the beautiful picture of “*the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect*” (Heb. 12:23). Every member is united to Christ and to each other in the Body of Christ. The NT churches exhibited a wonderful model of care and co-operation with each other. These churches were clearly connected together. For instance, the Philippians supported Paul’s mission work among the Thessalonians (Philp. 4:16) and the Gentile churches raised funds to help the poor in the Jerusalem church (cf. Acts 11:29). We need to remember that all of this was before the advent of modern methods of communication and inter-bank transfers.

The fundamental principles and leading features of the Presbyterian form of Government are seen throughout the NT. It is evident, however, that there is no detailed organisational pattern presented in the New Testament beyond this. It is not surprising that we find diversity in many of the features of the denominations that hold to the Presbyterian system. Berkhoff notes this,

Reformed Churches do not claim that their system of Church government is determined in every detail by the Word of God, but do assert that its fundamental principles are directly derived from Scripture. They do not claim a *jus divinum* for the details, but only for the general fundamental principles of the system, and are quite ready to admit that many of its particulars are determined by expediency and human wisdom. From this it follows that, while the general structure must be rigidly maintained, some of the details

may be changed in the proper ecclesiastical manner for prudential reasons, such as the general profit of the churches.

It is, therefore, right to infer that Presbyterianism is essential to the well-being of a church, but it is not something that goes to the essence of what a church is. There are many godly men and congregations that have not embraced the Presbyterian model. Furthermore, adopting the Presbyterian form of Government does not guarantee that the church and denomination will remain true to the faith. There never has been a perfect church on earth and there never will be. Presbyterian churches have suffered from the imperfections of even the best of men as well as the deception of hypocrites in its ranks. However, any church that is modelled on the Presbyterian system will maximize its fruitfulness to the glory of God. Church history reveals the truth of that statement.

**Glory to God, and praise and love
Be ever, ever given
By saints below and saints above,
The church in earth and heaven.**