

# **The Cambridge Platform of 1648**

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Church Government**

1. Church government (or polity) is that form and order<sup>1</sup> to which the church of Christ on earth must conform both in its constitution and in the administration of its affairs.<sup>2</sup>
2. Church government may be considered under two headings: first, the parts of church government, and second, the local application of church government. The Scriptures specify the parts of government, because the Lord Jesus Christ, the king and law-giver of his church, is no less faithful in the house of God than was Moses, who delivered the form and pattern of government that he received from the Lord to the children of Israel. The holy Scriptures are so perfect that they are able to make the man of God perfect and thoroughly equipped for every good work, including the well ordering of the house of God.<sup>3</sup>
3. The Word of God clearly describes all the parts of church government in order to satisfy the requirements of the second commandment.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, they must continue unchanged, like an unshakable kingdom, until the Lord Jesus Christ returns and he delivers his church to God the Father.<sup>5</sup> No man, officer, church, or any state in the world has the authority to add, diminish, or alter any part of them in the slightest way.<sup>6</sup>
4. The local application of church government involves such issues as meeting times and places, etc., and should be managed in a fitting and orderly way. They are not so open to interpretation that men may impose their own ideas on the churches.<sup>7</sup> The Scriptures provide many general limitations for determining matters which, though not of the essence of worship, are inseparable from it.<sup>8</sup> The goal must be edification, and the means employed must be decent, orderly, appropriate, and considerate of civil and church customs. Details may vary from place to place as each church considers the circumstances and determines what is best for the edification of all, but so long as these are rightly considered, the decisions may be deemed agreeable to the will of God.<sup>9</sup>

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **The Nature of the Universal Church in General and a Particular Visible Church**

1. The universal church is the whole company of those who are elected, redeemed, and in time effectually called from the state of sin and death into a state of grace and salvation in Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The "form" of a church is a covenantal union of saints meeting together as described in chapters 3 and 4. The "order" of the church is the structure of authority between the local congregation and its officers under Christ and is covered in chapters 5 through 10. The concerns of chapters 11 through 17 are for supporting and protecting this form and order.

<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel 43:11; Colossians 2:5; 1 Timothy 3:15

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 3:5,6; Exodus 25:40; 2 Timothy 3:16

<sup>4</sup> While the first commandment tells us who to worship, the second tells us how he is to be worshipped, i.e., not by ways of human invention, but by ways of God's direction (Deuteronomy 4:12-16). The authors of the Platform understood that this application of the second commandment, called the "regulative principle," pertained not only to the form of the worship service, but to the form of church government as well.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Timothy 3:15; 6:13,16; 1 Chronicles 15:13; Exodus 20:4; Hebrews 12:27,28; 1 Corinthians 15:24

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 12:32; Ezekiel 43:8; 1 Kings 12:31-33

<sup>7</sup> 1 Kings 12:28,28; Isaiah 29:13; Colossians 2:22,23; Acts 15:28

<sup>8</sup> The "essence of worship" points to those activities which make up the necessary elements of worship, while the phrase "inseparable from worship" points to those activities which are not required per se by the Scriptures, but which are supportive of those which are. For example, to assemble together is of the essence of worship, and is a matter which cannot be debated. This assembly must take place some place and some time, so these are matters inseparable from worship. However, not being revealed in the Scripture (beyond the fourth commandment), questions of when and where to assemble, etc., must be determined according to the principles laid down here.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 15:9; 1 Corinthians 11:23; 7:34; 14:26,40; 11:14,16; 14:12,19; Acts 15:28

<sup>10</sup> Ephesians 1:22,23; 5:25,26,30; Hebrews 12:23

2. This church is either triumphant or militant. The triumphant church is composed of the glorified saints in heaven. Those who still struggle with their enemies on earth<sup>1</sup> are the militant church.<sup>2</sup>
3. The militant church is in one sense invisible and in another visible. The church is invisible with respect to her members' relationship to Christ, since they are united with Him by the Spirit of God and faith in their hearts. The church is visible with respect to her members' public profession of faith individually and in particular churches. In this latter sense, there is a universal visible church.<sup>3</sup>
4. The members of the militant visible church are composed of those who either are or are not living according to the church order of the Gospel. Those who live according to this order not only enjoy the spiritual union and communion common to all believers, but also a local ecclesiastical and governmental union. Thus in the sense of a single common church order, there is not one universal visible church.<sup>4</sup>
5. The militant visible church has been organized differently at different times. Before God gave the Law at Sinai, the church existed in families; after this, the church was a nation; but since Christ, the church exists only in local congregations. Though these congregations are not independent of one another,<sup>5</sup> neither are they national, parochial, or ruled by a classis or any other external body.<sup>6</sup>
6. A congregational church, as instituted by Christ, is a part of the militant visible church. It consists of a company of saints called by God who are united into one body by a holy covenant for the public worship of God and the mutual edification of one another in the fellowship of the Lord Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Composition of the Visible Church

1. The visible church is composed of saints called by God.<sup>8</sup>
2. Saints are:
  - (a) Those who not only know of the principles of the Christian faith and are free of any glaring and public sins, but who also profess faith in Christ, repent of sin, and walk in such obedience to the Word of God that by charitable judgment they may be considered saints called by God. Nonetheless, some of them may be unsound and inwardly hypocrites, for in the Scriptures members of particular churches are called "saints and faithful brethren in Christ" even though some of these same churches are rebuked for having offensive and scandalous persons in their fellowship. Consequently the name of God is blasphemed, the holy things of God are defiled and profaned, the hearts of godly men are grieved and the wicked are hardened and encouraged in the path toward damnation. A little leaven leavens the whole loaf.<sup>9</sup>
  - (b) In addition, the children of these are considered saints.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> That is against "the world, the flesh and the devil."

<sup>2</sup> Romans 8:17; 2 Timothy 2:12; 4:8; Ephesians 6:12,13

<sup>3</sup> 2 Timothy 2:19; Revelation 2:17; 1 Corinthians 6:17; Ephesians 3:17; Romans 1:8; 1 Thessalonians 1:8; Isaiah 2:2; 1 Timothy 6:12

<sup>4</sup> Acts 19:1; Colossians 2:5; Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:12

<sup>5</sup> See chapter 10, paragraph 3, and footnote there.

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 18:19; Exodus 19:6

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:23,26; 1:2; 12:27; Exodus 19:5,6; Deuteronomy 29:1,9-15; Acts 2:42

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 1:1. Here and elsewhere in the original text, "saints by calling" does not mean those who are "named" saints, but those who are *called by God to be saints*. This calling is not merely an external call through the Word but an internal call by the Holy Spirit, what the Reformers referred to as God's "effectual calling" because the call comes with the power to effect its purpose. See chapter 2, paragraph 1, and the *Savoy Declaration*, chapter 10, "Of Effectual Calling."

<sup>9</sup> Hebrews 6:1; 1 Corinthians 1:5; Romans 15:14; Psalm 50:16,17; Acts 8:37; Matthew 3:6; Romans 6:17; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:2; Ephesians 1:1; 1 Corinthians 5:2,13; Revelation 2:14,15,20; Ezekiel 44:7,9; 23:38,39; Numbers 19:20; Haggai 2:13,14; 1 Corinthians 11:27,29; Psalm 37:21; 1 Corinthians 5:6

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:14. Chapter 4, paragraph 6, and chapter 12, paragraph 7, both address the place of children in the churches. The children of saints are considered holy (Acts 2:39; 1 Corinthians 7:14), and thus children born to church members are also considered members and have the benefit of the church's instruction and discipline. Still they do not come into "full communion" until

3. Though a church may be properly constituted, her members may in time degenerate and grow corrupt and scandalous. Though the church should not tolerate them, the fact that they remain due to the lack of church discipline and appropriate censures does not make a church cease to be a church. This was the case in the church of Israel and the churches of Galatia and Corinth, Pergamum and Thyatira.<sup>1</sup>
4. The membership of a church should not be greater than may regularly and conveniently meet together in one place,<sup>2</sup> nor fewer than may conveniently carry on church work. When the holy Scriptures speak of the Saints gathered into a church in a place where there was only one congregation, they usually call those saints "the church" in the singular, such as the church of the Thessalonians, the church of Smyrna, Philadelphia, etc.<sup>3</sup> But when they speak of the saints in a nation or province where there were several congregations, they usually call them "churches" in the plural, such as the churches of Asia, Galatia, Macedonia, etc.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, when the Scriptures speak of particular churches, such as the church at Jerusalem or the church at Antioch or Corinth or Cenchrea, they speak of them as assembling and meeting together in one place. Cenchrea is a particularly significant example, for it was a small port serving Corinth and yet was a distinct congregation with its own church separate from Corinth.<sup>5</sup>
5. Every church appointed and ordained by Christ has a ministry of elders and deacons appointed and ordained for her. These are the "ordinary" officers of the church,<sup>6</sup> and Christ has not appointed them to any ministry other than that of a local congregation. Elders are appointed to feed not all flocks, but only the particular flock of God over which the Holy Spirit has made them the overseers,<sup>7</sup> and they must diligently care for that entire flock. Moreover, since one congregation is as much as its elders can care for, a church is no larger than a congregation which may normally meet in one place.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **The Form of a Visible Church and Its Covenant.**

1. Saints called by God must have a visible union among themselves or they are not a discrete church. The Scriptures teach this by comparing the church to a body or building or house. Hands, eyes, feet and other members<sup>8</sup> must be united to be a body. Stones and timber, though cut, squared, and smoothed, are not a house until they are assembled together. Likewise, saints are not a church unless they are united together in church order.
2. Individual churches are separate and distinct from one another. Ephesus is not Smyrna, and Pergamum is not Thyatira.<sup>9</sup> Each one is a distinct church, having officers of its own who have no authority over other churches, virtues of its own for which others are not praised, and corruptions of its own for which others are not blamed.
3. The covenant by which a fellowship of believers gives themselves to the Lord and to the observing of Christ's ordinances together is what distinguishes one church from another. This is the "church covenant," and members can have no church authority over one another apart from it.<sup>10</sup> Indeed the Scriptures, by comparing each particular church to a city or to a spouse,<sup>11</sup> seem to suggest this form of union. The family of Abraham and the children of Israel became the people of God and the church of

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they can give evidence of their own repentance and faith in Christ and give their own "voluntary agreement" to the covenant. Until then they can neither come to the Lord's Table nor exercise the privileges of church authority which belong to members.

<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 2:21; 1 Corinthians 5:12; 14:21; Jeremiah 14; Galatians 5:4; 2 Corinthians 12:21; Revelation 2:14-21

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 18:17

<sup>3</sup> Romans 16:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; Revelation 2:28; 3:7

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 16:1,19; Galatians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 8:1; 1 Thessalonians 2:14

<sup>5</sup> Acts 2:46; 5:12; 14:27; 15:38; 1 Corinthians 5:4; 14:23; Romans 16:1

<sup>6</sup> See chapter 6, paragraph 3.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 20:28

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:27; 1 Timothy 3:15; Ephesians 2:22; 1 Corinthians 12:15-17

<sup>9</sup> Revelation 2

<sup>10</sup> Exodus 19:5,8; Deuteronomy 29: 12,13; Zechariah 11:14; 9:11

<sup>11</sup> Ephesians 2:19; 2 Corinthians 11:2

the Old Testament by means of a covenant. Likewise, it is a covenant that makes churches out of the various gatherings of Gentile believers in these days.<sup>1</sup>

4. The more detailed and clear this covenant (or voluntary agreement) is, the more it is able to keep church members aware of their duty to one another and to encourage them in it. Such a covenant also helps establish the legitimacy of a local church and makes clear who are its true members. Nonetheless, the essence of a covenant is the agreement and consent of a group of faithful people to meet regularly together as a congregation for worship and mutual edification, and the primary evidence of this agreement is their actual practice of doing so and submitting to God's ordinances together. In the Scriptures, people make covenants in a variety of ways, such as by word of mouth, sacrifice, written agreement and seal, and even at times by silent consent without any writing or words at all.<sup>2</sup>
5. Since this covenant requires mutual consent, one does not enter a covenant relationship solely because of faith in the heart, for that is invisible. Nor does one enter it merely by professing to have faith, for such a profession does not make a person a member of one church any more than another. Nor do people establish a covenant merely by gathering together, for atheists and non-Christians may live together with believers. Nor does anyone enter a church covenant by baptism, for baptism assumes the prior existence of the church. In the Old Testament, circumcision did not give existence to the church but the church existed before it and without it, hence the seals of circumcision and baptism presuppose the existence of a covenant. Furthermore, one person is a complete subject of baptism, but one person cannot be a church.
6. As God gives them opportunity, all believers should join themselves to a particular church and thereby honor Jesus Christ who himself submitted to the order and ordinances of the Gospel. There are great benefits in this visible union, including the promise of Christ's special presence in his church by which his people have fellowship with him, and in him with one another. Churches help believers walk in God's ways and recover them when they wander; and all Christ's sheep are prone to wander and are unable to return to him without help. Also there is the benefit of mutual edification, not only for believers, but also for their children who would otherwise be cut off from the privileges of the covenant.<sup>3</sup> If a believer were not to join a church, he would not have the benefit of a church's healing ministry if he sins. Moreover, if all believers were to neglect this duty, Christ would have no visible churches on earth.<sup>4</sup>

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Authority in the Church**

1. Authority in the church is either supreme or subordinate (i.e., belonging to her ministers). God the Father has given the supreme authority to the Lord Jesus Christ. The subordinate authority is either the extraordinary authority given to the apostles, prophets and evangelists or the ordinary authority given to individual congregations.<sup>5</sup>
2. Ordinary authority is of two kinds. One is the authority of office, which belongs to the elders. Another is the authority of privilege, which belongs to all church members. This authority of privilege belongs to the membership by virtue of their spiritual union with Christ, and they need no further authorization to exercise it. The authority of office, however, exists only in those appointed to an office and may be exercised only by those who are formally set apart to that office.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 17:7; Deuteronomy 29:11,13; Ephesians 2:12,19

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 19:5-8; 24:3,17; Joshua 24:18-24; Psalm 50:5; Nehemiah 9:38; 10:1; Genesis 17; Deuteronomy 29

<sup>3</sup> See chapter 12, paragraph 7.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:47; 9:26; Matthew 3:13-15; 28:19,20; Psalm 133:2,3; 87:7; Matthew 18:20; 1 John 1:3; Psalm 119:176; 1 Peter 2:25; Ephesians 4:16; Job 22:24,25; Matthew 18:15

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 28:18; Revelation 3:7; Isaiah 9:6; John 20:21,23; 1 Corinthians 5:12; 14:32; Titus 1:5

<sup>6</sup> Romans 12:4,8; Acts 1:23; 6:3,4; 14:23; 1 Corinthians 10:29,30

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **The Officers of the Church, Especially Pastors and Teachers**

1. Since a church is a fellowship of people joined together by a covenant for the worship of God, a church may exist without any officers, so long as the basic elements of saints and a covenant are present. The Word implies this when it says that the apostles ordained elders in every church.<sup>1</sup>
2. Nevertheless, though officers are not absolutely necessary to the simple being of churches when they are first established, they are essential to their well being. For this reason the Lord Jesus out of his tender compassion has appointed and ordained officers, which he would not have done if they were not useful and necessary for the church. When he ascended into heaven, he received gifts for men, including officers for his church. They should be highly esteemed and continue to the end of the age for the perfecting of all the saints.<sup>2</sup>
3. The officers are either extraordinary or ordinary. The extraordinary officers are the apostles, prophets and evangelists, and the ordinary officers are elders and deacons. The apostles, prophets and evangelists were called extraordinarily by Christ,<sup>3</sup> and their offices ended with them. Thus when Paul directed Timothy how to organize churches, he gave no direction about the choice or ministry of apostles, prophets, or evangelists, but only of elders and deacons.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, when he was preparing to leave the church of Ephesus, he committed the care and feeding of the church to no one but the elders of that church. The apostle Peter did the same.<sup>5</sup>
4. Elders are also called bishops in the Scriptures and are of two kinds. Some attend mainly to the ministry of the Word as pastors and teachers. Others attend especially to church government and are called governing elders.<sup>6</sup>
5. The offices of pastor and teacher appear to be distinct.<sup>7</sup> The pastor's special work is exhortation and to administer a word of wisdom. The teacher's special work is doctrine and to administer a word of knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Either of them may administer the sacraments, for these are the seals of the covenant of which both are called to be ministers. Likewise either may exercise church discipline, for this is an application of the Scriptures which both are called to preach and apply.<sup>9</sup>
6. In addition, since both pastors and teachers are Christ's gift to his church for perfecting the saints and building up his body, both are officers of the church. The pastor is not for the church and the teacher for the schools, although schools are lawful, useful and necessary to train others for these two offices.<sup>10</sup>

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **Governing Elders and Deacons**

1. The governing elders' office is distinct from the office of pastor and teacher. They are not called governing elders to exclude the pastors and teachers from governing, for governing is common to all elders. However, preaching and teaching are the distinct responsibilities of the pastor and teacher.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 14:23

<sup>2</sup> Romans 10:17; Jeremiah 3:15; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:8-13; Psalm 68:18; Ephesians 4:11; Galatians 1; Acts 8:6,16,19; 11:28; Romans 11:7,8

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:9

<sup>4</sup> 1 Timothy 3:1,2,8-13; Titus 1:5; Acts 20:17,28; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 5:17

<sup>5</sup> 1 Peter 5:1-3

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 4:11; Romans 12:7,8; 1 Corinthians 12:8

<sup>7</sup> It is not certain whether Ephesians 4:11 intends two distinct offices or one office of pastor-teacher. But what is clear, as this paragraph stresses, is that a church needs both doctrine (the work of the teacher) and application (the work of the pastor) if it is to grow into full maturity.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Timothy 4:1,2; Titus 1:9

<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 4:11,12; 1:22,23

<sup>10</sup> 1 Samuel 10:12,19,20; 2 Kings 2:3,15

2. Governing elders work with the pastor and teacher in those acts of spiritual leadership that are distinct from the ministry of the Word and sacraments. These include:
  - a) to open and shut the doors of God's house<sup>2</sup> by the admission of members approved by the church, by the ordination of officers chosen by the church, by the excommunication of flagrant and unrepentant offenders renounced by the church; and by the restoration of penitents forgiven by the church,<sup>3</sup>
  - b) to call the church together when necessary and to dismiss them at the appropriate time,<sup>4</sup>
  - c) to prepare matters beforehand so that the church may deal with them at meetings more easily and quickly,<sup>5</sup>
  - d) to moderate<sup>6</sup> the discussion of issues at church meetings by explaining the issues to the church, arranging the times of speech and silence, and pronouncing decisions according to the mind of Christ with the consent of the church,<sup>7</sup>
  - e) to be guides and leaders in the administration of the church and all its work,
  - f) to see that members live contentedly where they are and not without an occupation or idly in their occupation,
  - g) to prevent and heal any offenses in conduct or doctrine that might corrupt the church,<sup>8</sup>
  - h) to feed the flock of God with a word of admonition,<sup>9</sup>
  - i) to visit and to pray over sick members when they are sent for,<sup>10</sup> and
  - j) to visit and pray with members at other times as they have opportunity.
  
3. The Lord Jesus has also instituted the office of deacon (sometimes called "helps") in his church. The Scriptures tell how deacons should be qualified: serious, plain-speaking, not indulging in much wine, not given to the love of money. They must first be tested and, if they are found blameless, appointed to the office of deacon. The office and work of the deacons are to receive the offerings of the church and the gifts given to the church and to keep the assets of the church. They are to use these funds to meet those needs for which the church is responsible, such as the Lord's Table, the support of the ministers, and the relief of others who are in need. To these latter they should distribute simply and impartially.<sup>11</sup>
  
4. The office of deacon is limited to the care of the temporal things of the church.<sup>12</sup> It does not include dealing with or the administration of spiritual things, such as the Word and sacraments.
  
5. The instruction of the apostle and practice of the church commends the Lord's Day as a proper time for the saints to bring their offerings.<sup>13</sup>
  
6. The institution of all these offices in the church is the work of God himself, of the Lord Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it is altogether unlawful for any officers he has not appointed to be placed in the church or to be retained by it, for they are human creations, mere inventions and appointments of man, to the great dishonor of Christ Jesus, the Lord of his house, the king of his church. Popes,

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 12:7-9; 1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Hebrews 13:17

<sup>2</sup> A frequent theme in early congregational writing is the "keys of the kingdom" (Matthew 16:19) given by Christ to the church and held by her officers.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Timothy 5:17; 2 Chronicles 23:19; Revelation 21:12; 1 Timothy 4:14; Matthew 18:17

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:7,8; Acts 2:6

<sup>5</sup> Acts 21:18,22,23

<sup>6</sup> The role of a church's officers to moderate a discussion is frequently supplanted by Robert's Rules of Order which may be useful but should be judged by the principles of chapter 1, paragraph 4.

<sup>7</sup> Acts 6:2,3; 13:15; 2 Corinthians 8:10; Hebrews 13:7,17; 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12

<sup>8</sup> Acts 20:28-32

<sup>9</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:12; Acts 20:20

<sup>10</sup> James 5:14

<sup>11</sup> Acts 6:3,6; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8; 1 Corinthians 12:28; 1 Timothy 3:8,9; Acts 4:35

<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:17

<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 16:1-3

<sup>14</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:8,11; Acts 20:28

patriarchs, cardinals, archbishops, archdeacons and others shall certainly be uprooted and cast out since they are not plants of the Lord's planting.<sup>1</sup>

7. The Lord has appointed older widows (where they may be found) to minister in the church by caring for the sick and giving aid to them and others in similar circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **The Election of Church Officers**

1. No man may take the honor of a church office to himself, but only someone who has been called by God, as illustrated by the calling of Aaron to the office of high priest.<sup>3</sup>
2. The calling of someone to an office is either direct or mediated. A direct call is by Christ himself, such as his call of the apostles and prophets,<sup>4</sup> and this manner of calling ended with them. A mediated call is by the church.
3. The church should first examine and test an individual before they elect or ordain him as an officer. Hands should not be laid quickly upon anyone, and both elders and deacons must be honest and have a good reputation.<sup>5</sup>
4. Those being considered for church offices should be tested for those gifts and virtues that the Scriptures require of those elected to such offices. Elders must be blameless, serious, able to teach, and endowed with such other qualifications as listed in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6-9. Deacons are to meet the requirements of Acts 6:3 and 1 Timothy 3:8-11.
5. Officers must be elected by the local churches where they are to minister. This authority of the church to elect its own ministers is of such importance that it was practiced even when the apostles were present.<sup>6</sup>
6. A church, being free, cannot become subject to any officer except by a free election. Yet when a church has chosen others to be over them in the Lord, they become subject to them and must willingly submit to the Lord's ministers whom they have chosen.<sup>7</sup>
7. If churches have the authority to choose their officers and ministers,<sup>8</sup> then in the case of obvious unworthiness and delinquency they also have the authority to remove them. For to open and shut, to choose and refuse, to place in office and to remove from office, are all acts belonging to the same authority.
8. When it is convenient, neighboring churches<sup>9</sup> should be notified and their help sought in the examination and choice of church officers, for this contributes much to the well being and communion of the churches.<sup>10</sup>
9. Civil magistrates or diocesan bishops or patrons may not choose officers for the churches, for the Scriptures say nothing about these, or any like them, having such authority.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 15:13 The same might be said for the offices of "Trustee," "Committee Chairman," "Treasurer," "Moderator," etc., if these positions carry an authority equivalent to, or independent of, that of the Elders and Deacons.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Timothy 5:9,10

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 5:4

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 1:1; Acts 14:23; 6:3

<sup>5</sup> 1 Timothy 5:22, 7:10; Acts 16:2, 6:3

<sup>6</sup> Acts 14:23, 1:23; 6:3,4,5

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 5:13; Hebrews 13:17

<sup>8</sup> Romans 16:17

<sup>9</sup> The assumption is that these would be churches of like faith and order.

<sup>10</sup> Canticles 8:8,9; Acts 13:3; 14:23



## CHAPTER NINE

### Ordination and the Laying on of Hands

1. Churches not only choose their own officers, but also ordain them by the laying on of hands and prayer. When elders are ordained, fasting ought also to be included.<sup>1</sup>
2. Ordination is nothing other than the solemn installation of a man into the church office to which he has been elected. As such, it resembles the public installation to office of an elected official.<sup>2</sup> Ordination should follow election, not precede it.<sup>3</sup> The calling of an individual to an ordinary office does not consist in his ordination but arises from his voluntary and free election by the church and in his acceptance of that election. The relationship between a pastor and his flock, between a minister and his people, rests on this voluntary and free agreement alone. Ordination does not make someone an officer nor endow him with the gifts and virtues required for his office. The apostles were elders without the laying on of hands, as were Paul and Barnabas.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Levi's offspring were priests and Levites before the children of Israel laid hands on them.
3. In churches with elders, the elders should perform any ordination by the laying on of hands.<sup>5</sup>
4. In churches without elders, the laying on of hands may be performed by any members chosen by the church for that purpose.<sup>6</sup> If the people may exercise the greater privilege of electing officers, they may certainly, if necessary, lay on hands in ordination, for this is no more than the fulfillment of the election.
5. Nevertheless, in churches without elders, the elders of other churches may perform an ordination if desired. The Scriptures tell of officers who laid hands upon the officers of other churches: the elders of Ephesus laid hands upon Timothy an evangelist, and the elders at Antioch laid hands upon Paul and Barnabas.<sup>7</sup>
6. Church officers are officers in only one church, the particular church over which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers. Elders are commanded to feed not all flocks, but only that flock which is committed to their faith and trust and which depends upon them. Thus, if there were an officer of the universal church,<sup>8</sup> it would not be necessary or even right for such a minister to settle in one congregation, for then he could not fulfill his obligation to care for all the flock.<sup>9</sup>
7. The person who has been released from his office in the church where he was serving may no longer be considered an officer, or exercise any act of office in any other church, unless he is again elected to an office. In such a case it is appropriate for hands to be laid upon him again in ordination, just as Paul the apostle received imposition of hands at least twice from Ananias.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Timothy 5:22

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 8:10; Acts 6:5,6; 13:2,3

<sup>3</sup> Acts 6:5; 14:23

<sup>4</sup> Acts 13:3

<sup>5</sup> 1 Timothy 4:10; 5:22; Acts 13:3

<sup>6</sup> Numbers 8:10

<sup>7</sup> 1 Timothy 4:14; Acts 13:3

<sup>8</sup> The writers of the platform have already denied that there could be such a thing. See chapter 7, paragraph 6.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Peter 5:2; Acts 20:28

<sup>10</sup> Acts 9:17; 13:3

## CHAPTER TEN

### Church Authority and the Elders

1. Jesus Christ alone possesses supreme and lordly authority over all the churches on earth. He is the king and head of the church; he has the government upon his shoulders; and he has been given all authority in heaven and on earth.<sup>1</sup>
2. A fellowship of professing believers joined together by a covenant is a church before they have officers and without them. Consequently, the authority delegated by Christ to a church<sup>2</sup> resides even in a church that has no officers, because that authority is essential to a church and inherent in its nature. It is natural for all organic bodies to have sufficient power for their own preservation and subsistence.<sup>3</sup>
3. The government of a church is a mixed government. (This was acknowledged long before the term "Independent" was used.)<sup>4</sup> With respect to Christ, the head and king of the church, and his sovereign authority, the church is a monarchy. With respect to all the members of the body and the authority granted by Christ to them, it resembles a democracy.<sup>5</sup> With respect to the elders and the authority committed to them, it is an aristocracy.<sup>6</sup>
4. Christ exercises his sovereign authority that is unique to him in the following ways:
  - a) by calling the visible church out of the world into holy fellowship with himself,<sup>7</sup>
  - b) by instituting the ordinances of his worship and appointing his ministers and officers to administer them,<sup>8</sup>
  - c) by giving laws for the ordering of all his peoples' ways and the ways of his house,<sup>9</sup>
  - d) by giving authority and life to all his institutions and through them to his people,<sup>10</sup> and
  - e) by protecting his church against and delivering her from all the enemies of her peace.<sup>11</sup>
5. The authority granted by Christ to all the members of a church is the privilege of:
  - a) choosing their own officers, whether elders or deacons,<sup>12</sup> and
  - b) admitting their own members. There is also good reason that they should have authority to remove someone from their fellowship. In the event that any individual has offended, any member has the authority to convince and admonish the person who has offended. If the admonition is not heeded, he or she may take one or two others in an attempt to persuade. However, if the admonition still is not heeded, they are to tell the church, which has the authority to discipline the offender, either by admonition or excommunication. Likewise, upon repentance, the church has the authority to restore the offender to his former communion.<sup>13</sup>
6. If an elder persists in any known sin so that it becomes necessary to dismiss him from office, the church that had the authority to call him to office has the authority to remove him from office. However, they ought to seek the counsel of other churches when that counsel is available. If after being removed from

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 2:6; Ephesians 1:21,22; Isaiah 9:6; Matthew 28:18

<sup>2</sup> See chapter 5, paragraph 2.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 1:23; 14:23; 6:3,4; Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:4,5

<sup>4</sup> The authors of the Platform strongly resisted the idea that their churches were independent from one another and would no doubt also disapprove of the word "autonomous" so commonly used today. See chapters 15 and 16 for the understanding of the interdependence of the churches.

<sup>5</sup> It "resembles" a democracy because the members vote and possess certain privileges by which they participate in church government. But the church is emphatically not a democracy in the sense that the members govern and rule themselves. The government belongs to Christ and delegated it to the officers. See paragraph 7 below.

<sup>6</sup> Revelation 3:7; 1 Corinthians 5:12; 1 Timothy 5:27

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 1:4; Revelation 5:8,9

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 28:20; Ephesians 4:8,11

<sup>9</sup> James 4:20; Isaiah 33:22; 1 Timothy 3:15

<sup>10</sup> 2 Corinthians 10:4,5; Isaiah 32:2

<sup>11</sup> Luke 1:71

<sup>12</sup> Acts 6:3,5; 1:23; 9:26

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 18:15,16,17; Titus 3:10; Colossians 4:17; 2 Corinthians 2:7,8

office an individual remains hardened and unrepentant in his sin, the church has the authority to remove him from membership just as any other member.<sup>1</sup>

7. Christ has delegated the government of the church to her officers. They are called "leaders" while they govern under God, although if they are delinquent in their duties they are subject to the authority of the church, as has already been said.<sup>2</sup> Wherever in Scriptures the Holy Spirit mentions church government, he assigns it to elders, and the work and duty of the people is to obey their elders and submit to them in the Lord. Thus, a complete church consists of both those who govern and those who are governed in the Lord.<sup>3</sup>
8. Christ has given the elders authority to feed and govern God's church. Accordingly, they may call a church meeting when it is necessary to deal with an important matter. The members may not refuse to come without good reason, depart before dismissed, speak without permission, nor continue speaking when silence is required, nor oppose or contradict the judgment of the elders without sufficient and weighty reason. Such practices are contrary to order and are sources of disturbance and confusion.<sup>4</sup>
9. The elders are responsible to examine any officers or members before the church receives them. In addition, any accusations against a member should be brought first to the elders who will prepare them to be heard by the church. In dealing with offenses and similar matters, the elders have authority to present their understanding of the counsel and will of God and, with the consent of the church, pronounce judgment. Finally, the elders have the authority, when they dismiss the people, to bless them in the name of the Lord.<sup>5</sup>
10. The elders' authority to govern does not diminish in any way the authority that belongs to a church's members, and the authority that belongs to the members does not diminish in any way the elders' authority to govern. Rather the two should sweetly agree together. The Scriptures provide examples of this. On the one hand the apostles, although they possessed the greatest authority in the church, sought the agreement and consent of the brethren in the administration of the churches. On the other hand, 2 Corinthians 2:9 and 10:6 show how the churches were to act with obedience not only toward the apostles but also toward their ordinary elders.<sup>6</sup>
11. Thus, there are two guiding principles. The first is that the ordinary authority to govern belongs to the elders. The second is that all church members have their appropriate authority, including the exercise of judgment in matters of discipline and of liberty in matters of liberty. Therefore, it follows that the proper administration of the church is a combined administration of the members and their elders, and no action is complete without the consent of both.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

### **The Support of Church Officers**

1. According to the apostle, ministers of the Word should receive necessary and sufficient support. This is evident from the law of nature and nations, the Law of Moses, the obvious rightness of it, and common reason. The Scriptures not only call elders "laborers" and "workmen," but say that the worker deserves his wages and require anyone who receives instruction in the Word to share all good things with his teacher. They also state as a divine command that those who preach the Gospel should receive their living from the Gospel and forbid muzzling the ox while it is treading out the grain.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 4:17; Romans 16:17; Matthew 18:17

<sup>2</sup> See chapter 8, paragraph 7.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:7,17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; Romans 12:8; 1 Corinthians 12:28,29

<sup>4</sup> Acts 20:28; 6:2; Numbers 16:12; Ezekiel 46:10; Acts 13:15; Hosea 4:4

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 6:23-26; Revelation 2:2; 1 Timothy 5:19; Acts 21:18,22,23; 1 Corinthians 5:4,5

<sup>6</sup> Acts 14:15,23; 6:2; 1 Corinthians 5:4; 2 Corinthians 2:6,7; Hebrews 13:17

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 6:6; 1 Corinthians 9:9,14,15; Matthew 9:38; 10:10; 1 Timothy 5:18

2. The Scriptures state that the support of ministers is a duty and obligation, not a matter of charity or a gift. Therefore, people are not free to do as they please in this matter, any more than with any other command or ordinance of the Lord. Rather all are required to give out of their earthly resources to those who labor among them in the Word and doctrine, just as they must pay any other workers their wages, or satisfy any other debts, or submit themselves to observe any other ordinance of the Lord.<sup>1</sup>
3. When the apostle teaches that anyone who receives instruction in the Word must share all good things with his teacher,<sup>2</sup> he does not leave any doubt about what or how or in what proportion a person shall give. The Lord has given clear instructions in his Word.<sup>3</sup>
4. Not only church members, but everyone who is taught the Word should share all good things with his teacher. If a congregation is deficient in its support, the deacons should call upon them to do their duty.<sup>4</sup> If this appeal is not successful, the church shall require it of her members by her own authority. But if, because of corruption, a church does not or cannot do so, the civil magistrate must see that the ministry is properly provided for, as in the example of Nehemiah. For the magistrates are required to uphold the Ten Commandments, and it is better and easier to do this by supporting the godly influence of the church's ministry which will help prevent offenses than to have to correct offenses after they have occurred.<sup>5</sup> Yet it is best for churches themselves to take care that each person know what proportion he should give and what he should do before he is urged to do it, so that his judgment and heart may be satisfied in what he does and any offense is avoided.<sup>6</sup>

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

### **Admission of Members into the Church**

1. The doors of Christ's churches on earth do not stand so wide open that all sorts of people, good or bad, may freely enter as they desire. Those who are admitted to church membership must first be examined and tested as to whether they are ready to be received into church fellowship or not. Philip examined the Ethiopian eunuch about his faith in Jesus Christ before he was admitted to the church. The Lord commended the church at Ephesus for testing those who said they were apostles and were not. Similarly, those who profess to be believers should be examined. A church's officers are charged with keeping the doors of their church, and therefore it is their special responsibility to examine the fitness of those who would enter. Twelve angels stand at the gates of the temple lest those who are ceremonially unclean should enter.<sup>7</sup>
2. These things are required of all church members: repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore repentance and faith are the things about which individuals must be examined before they are granted membership in a church, and they must profess and demonstrate these in such a way as to satisfy rational charity that they are genuinely present. John the Baptist baptized those who confessed and were ashamed of their sins. Of others it is said that "they came and confessed and showed their deeds."<sup>8</sup>
3. The weakest measure of faith is to be accepted in those who desire to be admitted into the church, because weak Christians, if sincere, have the essence of the faith, repentance, and holiness which are required in church members. Moreover, these weak Christians have most need of the church's ordinances for the confirmation of their faith and their growth in grace. The Lord Jesus would not snuff out the smoking wick, nor break the bruised reed, but he gathers the tender lambs in his arms and

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 15:27; 1 Corinthians 9:21

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 6:6

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 16:2

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 6:6; Acts 6:3,4

<sup>5</sup> See chapter 17, especially paragraphs 2 and 6.

<sup>6</sup> Nehemiah 13:11; Isaiah 44:23; 2 Corinthians 8:13,14

<sup>7</sup> 2 Chronicles 29:19; Matthew 13:25; 22:12; Acts 8:37; Revelation 2:2; Acts 9:6

<sup>8</sup> Acts 2:38-42; 8:37; Matthew 3:6; Acts 19:18

carries them gently in his bosom. Such charity and tenderness are to be exercised that the weakest Christian, if sincere, may not be excluded or discouraged. Severity of examination must be avoided.<sup>1</sup>

4. If any, because of excessive fear or other infirmity, are unable to give a personal account of their spiritual life in public, it is enough for the elders, when satisfied about such persons' spiritual state, to give a public report to the church along with their approval. This approach leads to the greatest edification for all. However, for those who can do so, it is best that they give their own testimony and make their confession personally with their own mouths before the whole church, just as David did.<sup>2</sup>
5. A personal and public testimony of God's manner of working upon the soul is lawful, necessary and useful. Before the apostles admitted three thousand new members to the church, they received clear evidence that they had been "cut to the heart" by Peter's sermon, that they earnestly desired to be delivered from their sins which now lay heavy on their consciences, and that they had gladly received the word of promise and exhortation. The believer should be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in him to every one who asks. Therefore, church members must be able and ready upon any occasion to declare and show their repentance for sin, sincere faith, and effectual calling, because these are the reason of a well-grounded hope. "I have not hidden your righteousness from the great congregation."<sup>3</sup>
6. This profession of faith and repentance, which is required from those who were never church members before, may also be required of those who formerly have been members of some other church. (Those three thousand who made their confession at Pentecost<sup>4</sup> had been members of the church of Israel before, as were those John baptized.) Churches may err in their admission, and persons properly admitted may fall into open sin. If a church were permitted to impose her members on another, or if a church member might impose himself upon another church without due examination, the liberty of the churches would be violated. The churches must be free to examine those about whose fitness for membership they are not satisfied. Furthermore, the churches would unavoidably be corrupted and their ordinances defiled if they could not refuse but must receive the unworthy. For one church to impose her members on another is contrary to the Scriptures, which teach that all churches are sisters and therefore equal.<sup>5</sup>
7. Baptized persons who were born into a church fellowship, or who came to a church as children when their parents made their covenant with the church, must also be examined when they reach the years of discretion and desire to take part in the Lord's Supper. These, just as others, must be tested and give public testimony of their faith and repentance before they may come to the Lord's Table, for holy things must not be given to the unworthy. Yet, even before they are received into full communion, those who are members of the church since birth or childhood have privileges that others who are not church members do not have. For they are in covenant with God and have the covenant's seal (i.e. baptism) upon them, so that if they are not yet regenerate, they are in a more hopeful position to receive regenerating grace and all the spiritual blessings of both the covenant and the seal. They are also under the care of the church and thus subject to her rebukes, admonitions and censures that work for their healing and correction as necessary.<sup>6</sup>

## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

### **Transfer of Membership and Letters of Recommendation and Dismissal**

1. Church members are not free to move to a different location or leave the church without good and sufficient reason, but they should continue to live together, for the Scriptures instruct them not to give up

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 14:1; Matthew 12:20; Isaiah 40:11

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 66:8

<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:37,41; 1 Peter 3:15; Hebrews 11:1; Ephesians 1:18; Psalm 40:10

<sup>4</sup> Acts 2

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 3:5,6; Galatians 2:4; 1 Timothy 5:24; Canticles 8:8

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 7:6; 1 Corinthians 11:27

meeting together.<sup>1</sup> Such departures lead to the dissolution and ruin of the body, just as the pulling of stones and pieces of timber from a building and of parts from the natural body lead to the destruction of the whole.

2. Therefore, it is the responsibility of church members to consult with their church, at an appropriate time and place, about any decision to leave.<sup>2</sup> In this way, they either may have the approval of the church and be encouraged or be dissuaded. Those who have joined with the consent of the church should not leave without that same consent, unless compelled to do so.
3. If a member's departure is clearly unsafe and sinful, the church should not consent; otherwise they would not be acting in faith and would be sharing in the sin. If any case is doubtful and the member cannot be persuaded to remain, it seems best to leave the matter to God and not insist that he stay.<sup>3</sup>
4. The following are legitimate reasons for a member to leave a church:
  - a) if he cannot continue without partaking in sin;<sup>4</sup>
  - b) if he is subject to personal persecution, as when Paul departed from the disciples in Damascus, or a general persecution when all are scattered;<sup>5</sup> and
  - c) if he has a legitimate and serious material need and has an opportunity to satisfy that need elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> provided there is also an opportunity for continued spiritual edification. In these and similar cases, a member may rightfully move and the church cannot detain him.
5. However, to separate from a church because of contempt for her holy fellowship, or because of greed, or for one's own advantage without consideration of the loss to the church, or because of a division, or for lack of love is sinful. It is also sinful to separate because of anger over some offense, real or imagined, when the church is not yet convinced that a wrong has been committed and when the offense may and should be tolerated and healed with a spirit of meekness. To withdraw from the teaching and sacraments and discipline of a church for these reasons or others like them is unlawful and sinful.<sup>7</sup>
6. Those members who have the approval of their church to move to another location should join a church in their new residence, for if they do not, they can neither exercise the duties nor receive the privileges of church membership. If such a bad example were tolerated, it is likely to corrupt others, which would, if many followed them, lead to the dissolution and confusion of the churches, contrary to the Scriptures.<sup>8</sup>
7. A member who leaves a church must have letters of testimony and dismissal from the church of which he has been a member to the church he desires to join.<sup>9</sup> This is necessary if the church is to receive him in faith and not be deluded and corrupted by receiving deceivers and false brethren. Yet, an individual remains a member of the church that gave him a letter of dismissal until he is actually received as a member of another. No church can deprive an individual of membership except by excommunication.
8. If a member is to leave a church for a limited period of time, he should be given a letter of recommendation which is sufficient for him to be received into the fellowship and care of another church for that period. Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchrea, had letters written for her to the church of Rome that they might receive her as one of the saints.<sup>10</sup>
9. Such letters of recommendation and dismissal were written for Apollos, for Marcus to the Colossians, for Phoebe to the Romans, and for various others to other churches. The apostle tells how some persons

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 10:25

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 11:16

<sup>3</sup> Romans 14:23; 1 Timothy 5:22; Acts 21:14

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 5:11

<sup>5</sup> Acts 9:25,29,30; Acts 8:1

<sup>6</sup> Nehemiah 13:20

<sup>7</sup> 2 Timothy 4:10; Romans 16:17; Jude 19; Ephesians 4:2,3; Colossians 3:13; Galatians 6:1,2

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 56:8; Acts 9:26; 1 Corinthians 14:23

<sup>9</sup> Acts 18:27

<sup>10</sup> Romans 16:1,2; 2 Corinthians 3:1

not known to the churches have special need of such letters, although he himself had no such need.<sup>1</sup> Such letters are for the benefit of those for whom they are written, for expediting their reception among other churches, and for the satisfaction and encouragement of the churches receiving them.

## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

### **Excommunication and Other Censures**

1. Christ has appointed church discipline to prevent, remove and heal offenses in the church,<sup>2</sup> to reclaim and restore sinners, and to deter others from similar offenses. Discipline serves to remove any leaven that may infect the whole loaf and to vindicate the honor of Christ, his church and his gospel. The proper exercise of discipline prevents the wrath of God from justly falling upon a church if she should permit his covenant and its seals to be profaned by flagrant and unrepentant sinners.<sup>3</sup>
2. In the case of a private offense (i.e. one brother sinning against another),<sup>4</sup> the offender should go and repent of his offense to his offended brother who should then forgive him. But if the offender neglects or refuses to do so, the offended brother should go to him and seek to convince and admonish him of his sin privately. If the offender is thus brought to repentance, the admonisher has won his brother. But if the offender will not hear his brother, the brother should return with two or more witnesses, so that by these witnesses the response of the offender (whether or not he will receive a word of admonition) may be verified. For if the offending brother still refuses to repent, the offended brother is to bring the matter to the elders who will bring it to the church. If the offending brother will hear the church and declare his sincere repentance, he is recovered and restored. However, if the church discovers that though willing to hear he remains unconvinced of his offense (as in, for example, the case of heresy), the church shall admonish him publicly. He shall thus be under the public discipline of the church and denied the fellowship of the Lord's Table until his offense is removed by penitent confession. However, if he remains obstinate, the church shall excommunicate him.<sup>5</sup>
3. In the case of an offense which is more public and of a more heinous and criminal nature<sup>6</sup> (such as is condemned even by the light of nature), the church must immediately without any gradual proceeding excommunicate the offender from their holy fellowship in order that his sin might be put to death and his soul healed in the day of Jesus Christ.
4. In dealing with an offender, great care must be taken to be neither too strict or rigorous nor too indulgent or neglectful. Discipline should be exercised with a spirit of meekness, remembering the sinful nature common to all lest those exercising discipline also fall into sin, and remembering that the best of saints have need of much forgiveness from the Lord. Yet since the goal of discipline is to win and heal the offender's soul, the offense must not be whitewashed nor the wounds of the brethren healed lightly. Some should be disciplined tenderly, while others must be saved with fear.<sup>7</sup>
5. While an offender remains excommunicated, the church shall refrain from all normal communion with him in spiritual things. In addition, except for what natural, domestic and civil relationships may require, church members shall also refrain from socializing with him in everyday life, including eating and drinking with him. In this way he may be ashamed.<sup>8</sup>
6. Since excommunication is a spiritual punishment, it shall not diminish or deprive an individual of his civil rights, nor shall it diminish the civil dignity or authority of a prince or other magistrate. Moreover, since the excommunicate is no different from a publican or pagan, and pagans are lawfully permitted to hear

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 18:27; Colossians 4:10; Romans 16:1,2; 2 Corinthians 3:1

<sup>2</sup> 1 Timothy 5:20; Deuteronomy 17:12,13; Jude 23; Deuteronomy 13:11; 1 Corinthians 5:6; Romans 2:24

<sup>3</sup> Revelation 2:14-16,20

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 5:23,24; Luke 17:3,4

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 18:15-17; Titus 3:10

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:4,5,11

<sup>7</sup> Galatians 6:1; Matthew 18:34,35; 6:14,15; Ezekiel 13:10; Jeremiah 6:14

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14

the Word at church meetings, the excommunicate is also free to hear the Word of God. Furthermore, since his recovery is still desired, he is not to be counted an enemy but admonished as a brother.<sup>1</sup>

7. If the Lord blesses an act of church discipline so that, by the grace of Christ, an offender publicly repents with a humble confession of his sin<sup>2</sup> and gives glory to God, the church shall forgive him. They shall comfort him and restore him to the loving communion with them that he formerly enjoyed.
8. To permit profane or scandalous offenders to continue in fellowship and participate in the sacraments is a great sin in those who have the authority to prevent or correct it but do not. Nevertheless, the presence of such sin is not just grounds for the godly to separate. Christ and his apostles in their times, and the prophets and other godly people in theirs, lawfully participated in the Lord's ordinances in the Jewish church. None of them taught or practiced separation, even though unworthy persons were among them. Likewise in Corinth, though there were many unworthy persons and practices, the faithful were never commanded to separate themselves from the sacraments. Thus in similar cases today the godly must not separate.<sup>3</sup>
9. Since separation from a church that tolerates profane and scandalous offenders is not necessary, neither should the worthy members of such a church stop coming to the Lord's Table.<sup>4</sup> For just as it is unreasonable for an innocent person to be punished for the faults of another in which he has had no part and gave no consent, so it is more unreasonable that a godly person should neglect his duty and punish himself by keeping himself from the sacraments merely because others are permitted to come who should not. This is especially so since he consents neither to their sin, nor to their approaching the ordinance in their sin, nor to the neglect of others who should discipline them.<sup>5</sup> On the contrary he sincerely mourns these things and humbly, as opportunities permit, strives to encourage others to do their duty. Only if the church cannot be reformed may godly persons use their liberty to leave a church.<sup>6</sup> However, this liberty does not relieve any godly person of his duty, within the limits of his authority and place, to encourage the church to discipline the unworthy offender.

## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

### **The Communion of Churches with One Another**

1. Though churches are distinct and should not be confused with one another, and though they are equal and none should have authority over another, they still should preserve church communion with one another because they are all united to Christ, not only spiritually but governmentally. The churches' communion with one another derives from this twofold union.<sup>7</sup>
2. The communion of churches is exercised in various ways.
  - a) One way is by mutual care in taking thought for one another's welfare.<sup>8</sup>
  - b) Another is by consulting with one another when there is need of the judgment and counsel of other churches regarding a person or matter where others may be more knowledgeable than themselves. In this way, the church at Antioch consulted with the apostles and the elders of the church at Jerusalem about the circumcision of the Gentiles and about the false teachers who were requiring it. Thus it is clear that any church which lacks light or peace among themselves on any matter ought to seek help from other churches whose elders and representatives should meet together in council to study and debate the points about which there is doubt or disagreement.<sup>9</sup> When the churches have agreed on the way of truth and peace, they should communicate it to the church concerned, by both

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:24,25; 2 Thessalonians 3:14

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:7,8

<sup>3</sup> Revelation 2:14,15,20; Matthew 23:3; Acts 3:1; 1 Corinthians 6; 15:12

<sup>4</sup> 2 Chronicles 30:18; Genesis 18:25

<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel 9:4

<sup>6</sup> See chapter 13, paragraph 4.

<sup>7</sup> Revelation 1:4; Canticles 8:8; Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Acts 15:23; Revelation 2:1

<sup>8</sup> Canticles 8:8

<sup>9</sup> Acts 15:2,6,22,23



letters and representatives. When a church is deeply divided or continues in any open scandal and refuses to seek the healing and help of other churches, it becomes an offense both to the Lord Jesus and to other churches because of its lack of mercy and faithfulness in not seeking to heal its wounds.<sup>1</sup> Such a church unwittingly cries out for other churches to exercise a fuller act of church communion through admonition.

- c) Thus, another way of communion is by admonition when a public offense is found in a church that either does not recognize it or is slow in proceeding to remove and heal it.<sup>2</sup> Paul had no authority over Peter, but when he saw Peter sinning, he publicly rebuked him before the church. In the same way, though one church has no more authority over another than one apostle over another, yet just as one apostle might admonish another, so may one church admonish another without usurping its authority. If the offending church does not heed the church which admonishes her, the church shall inform other neighboring churches<sup>3</sup> concerning both the offense and the neglect of brotherly admonition. Such neighboring churches should join in seconding the admonition. And if the offending church remains obstinate and impenitent, her neighboring churches may abandon communion with her and seek the help of a synod or council of neighboring churches who are walking rightly. If the offending church will not hear the synod and the synod then declares them obstinate, then individual churches who approve and accept the judgment of the synod should declare the offending church to be out of communion with them. Then, out of concern for the purity of their own communion, they may justly withdraw from participation with them at the Lord's Table and from other acts of holy fellowship among the churches. Nevertheless, if there are any members of the offending church who do not consent to the offense but bear witness against it, they are still to be received in communion, for it is not right that the innocent should suffer with the offending.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, after due time and the use of all good means to bring about the healing of their own church and with the counsel of neighbor churches, such innocent members may choose to withdraw from the fellowship of their own church and offer themselves to another. It is as proper for another church to receive them (assuming they are otherwise fit for church membership) as if they had been properly dismissed to them from their own church.
  - d) A fourth way of communion is by participation in the sacraments. When the members of one church occasionally come to another, they should be willingly admitted to the Lord's Table, for it is the seal of the believers' communion, not only with Christ and with the other members of their own church, but with all the churches of the saints.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, their children should not be refused baptism if their own minister is absent or if they desire such a fruit of the churches' holy fellowship. Any church that has more than one minister should willingly lend one of her own ministers to supply the place of an absent or sick minister of another church for however long he may be reasonably needed.
  - e) A fifth way is by recommendation when a member of one church has reason to move to another church.<sup>6</sup> If a member moves only for a season of time, he is commended to their watchful fellowship with a letter of recommendation. However, if he is called to resettle there, he is to be committed to the fellowship of their covenant with a letter properly releasing him.<sup>7</sup>
  - f) Finally, churches exercise their communion by ministering relief and aid to one another in any time of need. This may involve providing them qualified members who can serve as officers,<sup>8</sup> or it may involve providing outward support for the needs of poorer churches, just as the Gentile churches contributed liberally to the poor saints at Jerusalem.<sup>9</sup>
3. When a company of believers desires to bind themselves together as a church, they should declare their intent to the neighboring churches<sup>10</sup> which are walking according to the Gospel and should seek their presence and help and their right hand of fellowship. And if there is no good reason to object, the

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<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel 34:4

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 2:11-14

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 18:15-17, by proportion. See footnote at chapter 8, paragraph 8.

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 18:25

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:13

<sup>6</sup> Romans 16:1

<sup>7</sup> Acts 18:27

<sup>8</sup> Acts 11:22,29

<sup>9</sup> Romans 15:26,27

<sup>10</sup> Galatians 2:1-9, by proportion.

neighboring churches should readily grant their request. In this way, the new church is protected from error and the communion of the churches maintained.

4. Besides these ways of communion, there is also the founding of new churches. When a church grows too large, it is fitting to plant one church out of another.<sup>1</sup> This is done by sending forth those members of the church who are willing to go and by supplying some officers for them so that together they may form a church. (Just as when a hive is full and the bees go forth by swarms and gather themselves into other hives, so the churches of Christ may do the same.) The church from which they go shall hold out to them the right hand of fellowship, both in their gathering as a church and in the ordination of their officers.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### Synods

1. Synods that are assembled in an orderly manner and proceed according to the pattern of Acts 15 are an ordinance of Christ.<sup>2</sup> Although they are not absolutely necessary for the existence of churches, the iniquity of men and the corruption of the times make them necessary for the health of churches by promoting truth and peace within them.
2. Synods are spiritual and ecclesiastical assemblies and are called for spiritual and ecclesiastical purposes. A synod is properly constituted when the churches, exercising the authority delegated to them by Christ, send their elders and representatives to gather in his name.<sup>3</sup> The proper work of a synod is to debate and determine matters of religion<sup>4</sup> according to the Scriptures and then to publish their work for the churches that it concerns.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of a synod is to discover any errors or heresies and to establish truth and peace in the churches.<sup>6</sup>
3. Magistrates have the authority to call a synod by calling the churches to send their elders and representatives to counsel and assist them in matters of religion.<sup>7</sup> But the actual constitution of a synod remains an act of churches, and thus a synod may be called by the churches even when the civil magistrates are enemies of the churches and of church assemblies.<sup>8</sup>
4. The role of synods and councils is:
  - a) to discuss and resolve controversies of faith and conscience,<sup>9</sup>
  - b) to draw guidance from the Scriptures for sacred worship and for the government of the church, and
  - c) to testify against any deficiencies in government or corruption in doctrine or practice<sup>10</sup> in any particular church and give guidance for reformation. Synods may not issue censures or practice any other act of church discipline which belongs to the authority of the churches, for these things the council in Acts 15 would not do.
5. A synod's directions and decisions, to the extent that they are true to the Word of God, should be received with reverence and submission. The primary reason for this is their agreement with the Scriptures, without which they have no force, but they should also be respected as coming from an ordinance of God given to us in his Word.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 40:20; Canticles 8:8,9

<sup>2</sup> Acts 15:2-15

<sup>3</sup> Acts 15:2,3

<sup>4</sup> Acts 15:6

<sup>5</sup> Acts 15:7-23

<sup>6</sup> Acts 15:31; 16:4,15

<sup>7</sup> 2 Chronicles 29:4-11

<sup>8</sup> Acts 15

<sup>9</sup> Acts 15:1,2,6,7; 1 Chronicles 15:13

<sup>10</sup> 2 Chronicles 29:6,7; Acts 24,28,29

<sup>11</sup> Acts 15

6. Because it is difficult, if not impossible, for many churches to come together in one place with all their members, their delegates may represent them at synods. This is what happened at the council in Jerusalem when the church at Antioch did not attend with all its members but sent certain men.<sup>1</sup> Since elders are or should be most qualified to know the state of the churches and to give good counsel, they should be included in a church's choice of her representatives.<sup>2</sup> Yet Antioch sent not only Paul and Barnabas, but also others.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, when they arrived at Jerusalem, not only the apostles and elders assembled for the council, but also other brethren. Thus synods should consist of both elders and other qualified church members sent by the churches, and they should not exclude any church member who desires to participate.

## **CHAPTER SEVENTEEN**

### **The Civil Magistrate's Authority Over the Churches**

1. It is lawful, beneficial and necessary for Christians to gather themselves into churches where they may exercise all the ordinances of Christ according to the Word<sup>4</sup> even when the magistrate will not consent. The apostles and Christians did this in their day, although the magistrates were all Jewish or pagan and would not give their consent to the gathering of churches but most persecuted them as enemies.
2. Church government is no enemy of civil governments. Nor does it encroach upon the authority or jurisdiction of civil magistrates or in any way weaken their hands in governing.<sup>5</sup> Rather it strengthens their hands and encourages the people to yield more hearty and conscientious obedience to them.<sup>6</sup> Some enemies of Christ have argued otherwise in order to prejudice kings and princes against Christ's ordinances, suggesting that the kingdom of Christ cannot rise and stand without the falling and weakening of the civil government. Rather the contrary is true,<sup>7</sup> for the civil government also belongs to Christ, and both may stand and prosper together, each helping the other in their distinct administrations.
3. Magistrates may not use their power and authority to restrain churches or any other good works, but to help and further them.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the consent and approval of magistrates, when they may be secured, must not be slighted or lightly esteemed. Rather it is part of the honor due to Christian magistrates to seek their consent and approval that the churches may undertake their affairs with greater encouragement and comfort.
4. The magistrates have no authority to compel their subjects to become church members and to partake at the Lord's Table. Just as the Lord rebuked the priests for bringing unworthy persons into the sanctuary,<sup>9</sup> so it is unlawful for civil magistrates to do so. The magistrate should not impose on the church or compel to remain in the church any whom the church must excommunicate if they were members.<sup>10</sup>
5. Just as it is unlawful for church officers to interfere with the work of the magistrate,<sup>11</sup> so it is unlawful for the magistrate to interfere with the work of church officers. The example of Moses and David, both princes and prophets, is not to be followed, for their positions were unique. The Lord bore witness against the involvement of magistrates in the affairs of church officers by striking Uzziah with leprosy for presuming to offer incense.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 15:2

<sup>2</sup> Acts 15:2,22,23

<sup>3</sup> Acts 15

<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:41,47; 4:1-3

<sup>5</sup> John 18:36; Acts 25:8

<sup>6</sup> See chapter 11, paragraph 4.

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 49:23

<sup>8</sup> Romans 13:4; 1 Timothy 2:2

<sup>9</sup> Ezekiel 44:7-9

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:11

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 2:25,26

<sup>12</sup> 2 Chronicles 26:16,17

6. It is the duty of magistrates to be concerned about matters of religion and to strengthen their civil authority to encourage observance of the Ten Commandments. Magistrates are called "gods,"<sup>1</sup> and the purpose of their office is not only the quiet and peaceable life of those they govern, but the advancement of righteousness, honesty and godliness, indeed all godliness.<sup>2</sup> Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah are all greatly commended by the Holy Spirit for using their authority in religious matters, while those kings who failed in this were frequently rebuked by the Lord. Moreover, not only the kings of Judah, but also Job, Nehemiah, the king of Nineveh, Darius, Artaxerxes, and Nebuchadnezzar - men not usually considered types of Christ - are commended in the Scriptures for exercising their authority in this way.<sup>3</sup>
7. The magistrate is not to exercise his authority upon inward matters that are not open to his knowledge or observation, such as unbelief, hardness of heart, and privately held errors. Rather his authority concerns outward acts. Yet, this authority should not be used to command or punish any actions arbitrarily,<sup>4</sup> but only those deeds that are commanded or forbidden in the Scriptures. Acts about which the Scriptures speak clearly (though not always clear to the magistrate or others) are the proper object of the magistrate's authority, though he may often fail to exercise it.
8. These things are to be restrained and punished by civil authority: idolatry, blasphemy, heresy, expressing corrupt and evil opinions that destroy the foundation, open contempt for the preached Word, profaning of the Lord's Day, disturbing the peaceable administration and exercise of worship and the sacraments, and the like.<sup>5</sup>
9. If any church becomes schismatic and separates from communion with other churches, or if it walks unrepentantly and stubbornly in some sinful way contrary to the Scriptures, the magistrate shall employ his authority as necessary. For example, the tribes on the west side of the Jordan planned to battle the tribes on the east side whom they suspected of building an altar to worship other gods and turn away from the Lord.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 82:2

<sup>2</sup> 1 Timothy 2:1,2

<sup>3</sup> 1Kings 15:14; 20:42; 22:43; 2 Kings 12:3; 14:4; 15:35; Job 29:25; 31:26-28; Nehemiah 13; Jonah 3:7; Ezra 7; Daniel 3:29

<sup>4</sup> 1 Kings 20:28,42

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 13; 1 Kings 20:28,42; Daniel 3:29; Zechariah 13:3; Nehemiah 13:331; 1 Timothy 2:2; Romans 13:4

<sup>6</sup> Joshua 22