

SESSION 7

CHURCH GOVERNMENT & DISCIPLINE

Membership Question Addressed

5. Do you submit yourselves to the government and discipline of the Church, and promise to study its purity and peace?

INTRODUCTION

How important is the church to you⁷⁵? The church is very important to God. The apostle Paul tells us that God's will is that, *"through the church the manifold wisdom of God"* is *"made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places"* (**Ephesians 3:10**). Jesus himself says in **Matthew 16:18**, *"I will build **my church**, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it"*. Jesus calls the church 'mine'! He promises to 'build' no other institution on earth!^{76 77}. But, if the church is so important to God, then why is it so messy? Why do we hear of scandals, fights, and divisions? Why do people still get hurt? And, why does this give the church, and Christ himself a bad name? One reason is, that the church is still made up of sinful people like you and me. There are no perfect churches, because there are no perfect people. Another reason, and one that we hope to address today, is that the church has often forgotten how Jesus himself wants to run the church! He has not left us to run the church as we please. Jesus has structures, procedures and processes in place for the church, that we neglect at our peril. He shows us how to deal with sin, to resolve disputes, and to keep peace and harmony in the church for our good, and the glory of his name! The church can be what it was meant to be, if only we will heed what Jesus says about the church! So, in this session, we want to see, *firstly*, how **Jesus organises the church**; and *secondly*, how **Jesus disciplines the church**⁷⁸.

⁷⁵ Ken Golden, defines the "church" as "The assembly of God's people throughout the Bible, expanding from one family, to one nation, to people from every nation" in Ken Golden "Presbytopia: What it means to be Presbyterian" (UK, Christian Focus Publications, 2016), page 122.

⁷⁶ Terry Johnson in "Jesus and the Church" at <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/jesus-and-church/>, accessed August 10th, 2017.

⁷⁷ The early church understood this. Cyprian, the North African bishop said in AD 251, *"He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the church for his mother"* Cited in <https://www.christianhistoryinstitute.org/incontext/article/cyprian/> accessed August 10th, 2017. The Reformers understood this too. John Calvin wrote similarly in the 16th Century, *"for those to whom he (God) is Father the church may also be Mother"*, Calvin's Institutes 4.1.1.

⁷⁸ The following section follows closely Ken Golden "Presbytopia: What it means to be Presbyterian" (UK, Christian Focus Publications, 2016), pages 75-80.

JESUS ORGANISES THE CHURCH

Firstly, Jesus organises the church, by giving the church **officers/leaders**. In the Old Testament, God appointed officers in the nation of Israel to govern Israel: Moses the lawgiver, Samuel the judge, David the King, Ezra the priest, and Nehemiah the governor. These Old Testament leaders, are “types” and “shadows” of God’s perfect leader, Jesus Christ (**Matthew 28:18**, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”). The church now replaces Israel, as God’s visible kingdom on earth⁷⁹. And Jesus is the head of the church (**Colossians 1:18**). And, Jesus governs this church by delegating his authority to **officers** in the church (**Titus 1:5**)⁸⁰. In the New Testament, church, there are two offices, **Elders** and **Deacons**:

1. **Elders**: The term “elder” and “overseer” are refer to the same office in the New Testament (**Titus 1:5-7**, “...appoint **elders** in every town... an **overseer**, as God’s steward”). Elders are responsible for being **exemplary model believers**, and **teachers of God’s Word** (**Titus 1:5-9**, **1 Timothy 3:1-7**)⁸¹. In particular, elders are responsible for safeguarding sound doctrine (**Titus 1:9**, “give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it”). They are also expected to govern, care for and manage the church (**1 Timothy 5:17**, **1 Timothy 3:5**); commit themselves to the ministry of God’s Word (**Acts 6:4**, **1 Timothy 5:17**); shepherd God’s people (**1 Peter 5:2**); exercise church discipline (**Matthew 16:19**, **18:18**); and give an account to God for the church’s spiritual state (**Hebrews 13:17**). Elders need to be examined, recognised and ordained to the role (**1 Timothy 4:14**, “Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the **council of elders laid their hands on you**”)⁸². There are

⁷⁹ The New Testament church is referred to as the “Israel of God” (**Galatians 6:16**), a “holy nation” (**Exodus 19:6**, **1 Peter 2:9**), and a visible manifestation of God’s kingdom on earth (**Revelation 1:4-6**). It is now an international and spiritual entity made up of people from all nations (**Ephesians 2:11-22**).

⁸⁰ When Jesus was still on earth, he said to the apostles, that is those who had been with him and were his first disciples, “I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom” (Luke 22:29), and “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19, 18:18). This is legal language. ‘Binding’ involves ‘closing’, while ‘loosing’ involves ‘opening’. So, ‘binding’ means discerning and declaring that someone is outside the church through unbelief and unrepentant sin, while ‘loosing’ means discerning and declaring that someone is in the church, through repentance from sin, and faith in the gospel. The apostles were the foundational leaders of the church (Ephesians 2:20), and are no more. The leadership of the apostles were then passed on to elders in the church. Paul instructs the Ephesian elders to rule the church (Acts 20:17), and said that the Holy Spirit had made them “overseers” of the church (Acts 20:28). The same Paul instructs his disciple Titus to establish “order”, and “appoint elders in every town” (Titus 1:5). It is through these elders that Jesus now governs the church.

⁸¹ “As servants of the word, they are called *ministers* (Luke 1:2, Ephesians 6:21), in respect to oversight, they are known as *overseers* (Philippians 1:1, 1 Timothy 3:1), as shepherds of the flock, they are considered *pastors* (Ephesians 4:11, 1 Peter 5:2), as instructors of the faith, they are designated *teachers* (1 Corinthians 12:28-29, Ephesians 4:11), and for the respect of the office, they are deemed *presbyters* (Acts 20:17, Titus 1:5-8, 1 Peter 5:1)” from Ken Golden “Presbytopia: What it means to be Presbyterian” (UK, Christian Focus Publications, 2016), pages 79.

⁸² The Presbyterian Church of America’s (PCA) Book of Church Order (BCO) defines “ordination” as “the authoritative admission of one duly called to an office in the Church of God, accompanied with prayer and the laying on of hands, to which it is proper to add the giving of the right hand of fellowship.” Ordination, acknowledges that the person has the authority and power to exercise the office to which he has been ordained. Cited in Guy Waters, “How Jesus Runs the Church” (2011, NJ: P&R Publishing), page 107.

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two categories of elders: **Ruling Elders** who are **lay people** ordained to the role who focus on the governance of the church, and **Teaching Elders** who are full-time **pastors**, ordained to the role and who focus on preaching and teaching (**1 Timothy 5:17**, *“let the elders who **rule well** be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in **preaching** and **teaching**”*).

2. **Deacons:** There is also the office of **Deacon** (meaning “servant”). Deacons assist the church by attending to the practical needs of the people. The qualifications of deacons are given in **1 Timothy 3:8-13**, and are similar to that of elders, except that they are not required to be “able to teach” (**1 Timothy 3:2**). Deacons are first mentioned in **Acts 6:1-7**, where seven men were appointed to handle practical matters, like serving tables, and works of mercy, like distributing relief fairly to the widows of the church. This is so the elders can focus on prayer, and the Word. By doing so, they actually enhance the evangelistic work of the church! **Acts 6:7** says that, *“the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly”* after the appointment of the seven deacons!

By giving us **Elders** and **Deacons**, Jesus is showing us that he intends the church not just to care for the spiritual needs of her members, but also for the practical needs of her members. In the first gathering of the church after the day of Pentecost, it says that the church *“devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers”* (**Acts 2:42**). But, it also goes on to say, *“they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need”* (**Acts 2:45**). There was such a generosity and sharing, and love for one another, that it says in **Acts 4:34**, *“there was not a needy person among them”*⁸³.

Secondly, Jesus organises these officers into church **courts**. “Courts”, refer to *“the elders gathering together in order to declare the law of God for the benefit of the church”*⁸⁴. In a fully

⁸³ Note that this does not imply some kind of a “Christian communism” because in Acts 5:4 notes that it was still perfectly legitimate for Christians to own their own property. Acts 2, and 4 illustrates the *willing* generosity of those that had been touched by the Gospel.

⁸⁴ Guy Waters, “How Jesus Runs the Church” (2011, NJ: P&R Publishing), page 126.

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functioning Presbyterian system, these courts are organised at a **local, regional and denominational** level⁸⁵:

1. **Session:** At the local church level, the Bible shows us that each church is governed, by a group of both **Teaching Elders** (i.e. the full time pastors) and **Ruling Elders** (i.e. the lay people ordained as elders), who are **voted in by the Members** of the church. They work together and have equal authority in the **Session (Acts 14:23, Philippians 1:1, Titus 1:5)**. The **Teaching Elder**, that is the pastor, is usually the **Moderator**.
2. **Presbytery:** The Bible also presents different churches as interconnected. All the local churches in a particular city are referred to as “*the church*” (e.g. **1 Corinthians 1:2, Ephesians 1:1**). And so, representative **Teaching** and **Ruling Elders** from different local churches in a region meet together as a **Presbytery**. The presbytery governs the churches in a region, and are responsible for examining and ordaining Teaching Elders. Among them, they elect a **Moderator**.
3. **Synod/General Assembly: Acts 15:1-30**, describes the Jerusalem Council that ruled on a vital matter of doctrine that affected the whole church. The apostles Paul and Barnabas were commissioned to attend this counsel as representatives of the churches in Asia Minor. They were welcomed by the collective church (**Acts 15:2-4**), the council debated the issue (**Acts 15:7**), came to an agreement (**Acts 15:19-21**), and implemented the decision through a circular letter (**Acts 15:22-30**). In the current day, representative Teaching and Ruling Elders from different **Presbyteries** meet together at the **Synod or General Assembly**. Again, they elect a **Moderator** among themselves.

⁸⁵ In the history of the Christian church, there have broadly been three models of church government: episcopalian, congregational and presbyterian:

Episcopalian government, for example in the Roman Catholic, Anglican or Methodist traditions sees the church ruled by bishops (from the Greek word *episkopos*, which means ‘bishop’ or ‘overseer’). This system is hierarchical, with an archbishop with the highest authority. While this system has a clearly defined chain of command, and historical support, there is little Biblical support. In the Bible, the term for “bishop”/“overseer” (*episkopos*), and the term for “elder” (*presbuteros*) are synonymous (e.g. Titus 1:5-7, “appoint elders in every town... For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach”).

Congregational government, for example in the Baptist, and Evangelical Free traditions sees the church ruled by the congregation. The congregation has the highest authority in this form of government. This system also emphasises independence, and deemphasises inter-church connections. In the Bible, the church is described as interconnected. For example, in Acts 15:1-30, there was a meeting of the Jerusalem Council to deal with the heresy of the Judaizers who wanted to impose Mosaic Law as a condition for salvation. Even churches, started by the great apostle Paul could not resolve this matter among themselves! Instead, the churches in Asia Minor sent Paul, Barnabas, and others to attend the Council as representatives of these churches. There, they were “welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders”(Acts 15:4), and after “much debate” (Acts 15:7), the Council came to an agreement that was binding on all churches (Acts 15:19-21), and implemented this agreement through a circular letter (Acts 15:22-30).

Presbyterian government, which is what this church subscribes to, seeks to address the deficiencies of episcopalian and congregational government. In this system, the church is ruled by elders at the local, regional, and denominational level. “Presbyter” (*presbuteros*) means ‘older’ or ‘elder’, and a group of elders rules a local church, representative elders from churches in a region form a presbytery, and representatives from presbyteries in different regions form a synod, and in that way, they govern the church at the local, regional, and denominational level.

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In this model of church government, authority is distributed at various levels, and no one individual or institution has absolute authority. It is often said, *“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”*⁸⁶ Christians know this to be doubly true because we believe in the sinfulness of humanity. Many scandals take place because too much power is concentrated in a person or institution. Hence, church government has to have checks and balances at various levels, for the safety of God’s people!

JESUS DISCIPLINES THE CHURCH

Not only does Jesus organise the church, he also disciplines the church for its own good. **Hebrews 12:6-7** says that *“the Lord disciplines the one **he loves**, and chastises every son whom he receives... God is treating you as sons”*. God disciplines his church because he loves the church like a father loves his children. **Hebrews 12:11** says, *“For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it”*. And, God disciplines us, through the care and nurture of the elders of the church. In **1 Thessalonians 2:7**, Paul describes how he and the elders were *“gentle among you, like **a nursing mother** taking care of her own children”*. At the same time, he says, in **1 Thessalonians 2:11-12**, how they were *“like **a father** with his children”*, and they *“exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God”*. Because of the nature of this role, God calls his people to intelligently obey and submit to the elders insofar as they are faithful to God’s Word (**Hebrews 13:17**, *“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you”*)⁸⁷. There are actually two types of discipline in the church:

Firstly, there is **formative discipline**. This is preventive, and takes place week after week. The elders shape the lives of the congregation through the preaching and teaching of God’s Word, and through giving counsel in order to help people align their lives to God’s will. This keeps us from sin, and helps us to obey God’s will.

Secondly, there is **corrective discipline**. This is responsive, and has its goal the restoration of the person. In **Matthew 18:15-17**, Jesus shows us how to deal with sin in the church. It says, *“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother”* (**Matthew 18:15**). The first step is to approach the person who has sinned against you, and to try to resolve the matter between you. If this fails, there is the second step: *“But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with*

⁸⁶ Cited at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dalberg-Acton,_1st_Baron_Acton accessed August 11th, 2017.

⁸⁷ He also recognises that Elders can often be misunderstood and maligned in their their duties, and warns against admitting charges and accusations against Elders too easily (1 Timothy 5:19, “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses”).

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you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” (**Matthew 18:16**), which is to approach the person with one or two others in the church. If that fails, then the matter is escalated to the church courts, who deliberate and decide on the matter: “*If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.*” (**Matthew 18:17a**)⁸⁸. This means that the matter is first brought to the local Session, and if unresolved to the regional Presbytery, and, if yet unresolved, the the denominational Synod or General Assembly that has the final say. If the person is still unrepentant, he or she is to be expelled from the church and treated as an unbeliever (**Matthew 18:17b**, “*And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector*”, **1 Corinthians 5:13**, “*Purge the evil person from among you*”). This is not to be done in a vengeful, but rather with tears, and as the last resort. It is meant to strongly urge the person to leave their sin, and return to God (**2 Corinthians 2:5-11**).

CONCLUSION

Jesus is so concerned about his church, because it is made up of the precious people that he died for (**Ephesians 5:25**, “*Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her*”), you and me. He died to “sanctify” and “cleanse”, and to “present” us to himself “in splendour”, “without spot or wrinkle”, but “holy and without blemish” (**Ephesians 5:27**). You are precious to Jesus, and he has a great purpose for your good! And that is why he is so pedantic about how his church is run! And we should be too! And that is why he says to her leaders, “*Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood*” (**Acts 20:28**).

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What kind of officers should you expect to have in your church (**Titus 1:5-9**, **1 Timothy 3:1-13**)?
2. Would you be able to intelligently submit to the leaders in your church (**Hebrews 13:17**)?

⁸⁸ Jesus said to the apostles, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19, 18:18), not to the entire congregation. As we saw, the authority of the apostles has now passed to the elders. Hence, when Jesus says, “church” in Matthew 18:17, in our context, he means the assembly of Elders, the church courts, not the congregation. See Guy Waters, “How Jesus Runs the Church” (2011, NJ: P&R Publishing), page 19, and Chapter 3.