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A  
PATTERN IN THE  
HEAVENS:

PART ONE:  
ECCLESIOLOGY

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## PREFACE

The pages that follow form the first volume of a multi-volume exposition of the biblical doctrine of the church and its polity. The overall title, *The Pattern in the Heavens*, was chosen to reflect the fact that the church is not of human origin, but takes its form from the revealed mind of God in Scripture. The design or purpose of this dissertation is to lay the philosophical and theological basis for the polity that will be described and discussed in the second volume. This volume one attempts to deal with the *matter* of the church while the projected volume two will, Lord willing, deal with her *form*.

Chapter five of the dissertation is admittedly somewhat controversial. Some well-intended criticism has been brought with the idea that the dissertation is exegetical in the first four chapters and suddenly abandons Scripture and turns to creeds and confessions in chapter five. I would like to answer that particular criticism in this preface to the work.

First, it cannot rightly be said that other chapters are devoid of theological and creedal references nor that chapter five is devoid of Scripture references. The chapter reviews numerous Scriptures, especially in distinguishing between true evangelical faith of church members and the historical faith of the hypocrites who have attached themselves to the church. Further, the chapter takes up several Scriptures that have been adduced against this author's theological point of view and deals with them one after another.

Additionally, however, it should be pointed out that the distinction discussed in chapter five between the visibility and invisibility of the church is not an essentially exegetical issue. It is at root a theological distinction of Dogmatics and is best handled in that manner. The author hopes to call Presbyterians to view the Westminster Confession's statements concerning the visible/invisible distinction in light of the rest of the Reformed Creeds and not as a document that stands alone on the issue. As the dissertation will show, the author is not alone in his viewpoint. No less a Presbyterian light than the late Professor John Murray held the same or similar position. Professor James Bannerman also, at his most lucid, agreed that there are not *two* churches, but *one*.

The notion of Presbyterian Minimalism discussed in chapter eight does not assert that elderships ought not to have authority. The church's authority concerning sacred things will be discussed in some detail, Lord willing, in the second volume of this work. Rather, this dissertation asserts that the authority of elderships is carefully circumscribed by Holy Writ. It is really nothing more nor less than the Reformation doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* applied to ecclesiology. Some in this generation have characterized the Reformed understanding of worship as "The Regulative Principle of Worship." Presbyterian Minimalism proposes that a "Regulative Principle of Polity" would look very much the same as the worship principle long espoused by Reformed and Presbyterian churches.

I thank God for the patience he has given to the people of the First Presbyterian Church of Rowlett as I have labored in the preparation of this manuscript. They have been an encouragement to me throughout

the writing, typing, and editing process. God has privileged me indeed to pastor such a flock of his sheep.

Richard Bacon  
First Presbyterian Church Manse  
December 1999



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# 1. THE LAW OF THE HOUSE

## *THE TEMPLE AND THE PRINCE*

### *Context And Symbolism*

Reformed scholars, as opposed to Dispensationalists, understand Ezekiel chapters forty to forty-eight to constitute a prophesy of the restoration of the church of God under Messiah. This restoration is set forth by the prophet of the exile under the Old Testament symbol of the temple. Perhaps more to the point of this dissertation, the Westminster divines also so understood the prophesy of Ezekiel, for they included as the frontispiece of the Westminster Form of Church Government, the text of Ezekiel 43:11. Just as the Westminster divines believed that there was a law governing the church, so shall this dissertation attempt to set forth not only the fact that a law regarding the form of the Christian temple exists, but also it will attempt to demonstrate that the law of the temple is yet in force today as what may be termed Constitutional Presbyterianism or Presbyterian Minimalism.

The temple of Ezekiel's prophecy is clearly an ideal structure and is not "the second temple" built by the Jews who returned from the Babylonian exile. The measurements of the place indicate to the reader that Ezekiel's temple cannot now and could never be built upon the physical Mount Moriah (the earthly Mount Zion). Ezekiel's temple will be built, he claimed "upon a very high mountain" (Ezekiel 40:2).

Ezekiel’s vision took place in the “five and twentieth year” (Ezekiel 40:1) of the exile, which would correspond roughly to 575 BC. Ezekiel adds that his prophecy or vision took place on the tenth day of the first month (literally the head of the months) of the year. If Ezekiel was following the civil calendar — which seems unlikely given everything we know of Ezekiel — then his vision took place on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:27 cp. Leviticus 16:29).

More likely, given the fact that this vision concerns the temple and was given by inspiration to a prophet who was himself of a priestly family (Ezekiel 1:3), is the idea that the vision came to Ezekiel in accord with the cultic calendar which began in the spring rather than in the autumn. Thus Exodus 12:2, “This month shall be unto you the beginning of months: it shall be the first month of the year unto you” comprises or establishes Abib (Nisan) as the opening month of the cultic year.

Further, it was on that tenth day of the first month that the preparations for the Passover actually began. “The tenth day of this month was the day on which the preparations for the Passover, the feast of the elevation of Israel into *the people of God*, were to commence, and therefore was well adapted for the revelation of the *new constitution* of the kingdom of God.”<sup>(1)</sup>

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1. Carl Freidrich Keil, *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Ezekiel*, in C.F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch *Commentary on the Old Testament*, XXV volumes in X (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., repr. 1988), IX.2.184. Emphasis added.



The very high mountain of Ezekiel 40:2 is not the physical Mount Zion, but the ideal heavenly Mount Zion. It is exalted above the tops of all the surrounding mountains, indicating the honor and glory that God has determined to give the heavenly Mount Zion in its day. “But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people (literally *peoples*) shall flow unto it,” (Micah 4:1).

Further confirmation of the idealized Mount Zion can be found in Isaiah’s prophecy: “And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations (*kol-haggoyim*) shall flow unto it,” (Isaiah 2:2). The lofty mountain or high mountain of Ezekiel’s vision contained what he called a “frame of a city” or literally a city-edifice to the south. Keil rightly identified the city-edifice *not* as Jerusalem *per se*, but as the idealized temple. He opined, “Consequently what Ezekiel saw as a city-edifice can only be the building of the new temple, with its surrounding wall and its manifold court buildings.”<sup>[2]</sup>

The lofty mountain of Ezekiel’s prophecy has reference, at least in part, to the fact that the physical Mount Zion was not of sufficient size to accommodate the structures of his vision. The area of the temple with its two courts was 500 cubits square while the surrounding (holy) space was 500 reeds square (or 3,000 cubits square considering six cubits to the reed or rod). Finally there was a circuit of fifty cubits in breadth about the whole sanctuary (Ezekiel 45:2).<sup>[3]</sup> As Keil noted,

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2. *Ibid.*, 185.

“This broad separation is peculiar to Ezekiel’s temple, and serves, like many other arrangements in the new sanctuary and worship, to symbolize the inviolable holiness of that sanctuary.”<sup>{4}</sup>

The ideal character of Ezekiel’s latter day temple is further brought out by the fact that Ezekiel specifically refers to this prophecy as “the visions of God” or *b<sup>e</sup>mar<sup>e</sup>’oth*. As Fairbairn pointed out, “This alone marks it to be of an ideal character, as contradistinguished from anything that ever had been, or ever was to be found in actual existence, after the precise form given to it in the description. Such we have uniformly seen to be the character of the earlier visions imparted to the prophet.... They presented a vivid picture of what either then actually existed or was soon to take place, but in a form quite different from the external reality. Not the very image or the formal appearance of things was given, but rather a compressed delineation of their inward being and substance.”<sup>{5}</sup>

The Westminster divine John Lightfoot concludes similarly from the size of the mountain, the city, and the temple that they must refer to something spiritual rather than physical. He maintained, “And now, if any one will take up the full circuit of the wall that encompassed the holy ground, according to our English measure, it will amount to half a mile and about 166 yards. And whosoever likewise will measure the square of Ezekiel xlii.20, he will find it six times as large as this, the

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3. *Ibid.*, 272.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Patrick Fairbairn, *Commentary on Ezekiel* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1989 repr. Of Zondervan 1960), 444.

whole amounting to three miles and a half and about 140 yards — a compass incomparably greater than Mount Moriah divers times over. And by this very thing is showed that it is spiritually and mystically to be understood...to signify the great enlarging of the spiritual Jerusalem and temple, the Church under the Gospel, the spiritual beauty and glory of it.”<sup>{6}</sup>

Finally, the New Testament confirms and indeed canonizes the interpretation set forth in these pages. Most clearly, Hebrews 12:22ff. proclaims, “But ye are come to Mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly of the firstborn [masculine plural], which are written in heaven...” Additionally, we shall note other Scripture passages below in which the New Testament either directly or implicitly states that the present day Church is the fulfillment of God’s covenant promises to dwell gloriously with his people.

The temple in the Old Testament was the visible sign of God’s presence with his people; the place where God was said to dwell and where his glory was particularly manifested in the earth. Even before the temple was built and dedicated by Solomon, God was especially present with his people in the tabernacle that was prescribed in the days of Moses.

Ezekiel previously saw the departure of God’s glory from the temple (Ezekiel 10:18ff.). In chapters forty to forty-eight the prophet described his vision of God’s glory returning to the idealized temple.

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6. John Lightfoot, *Description of the Temple*, 1605. Cited in Fairbairn, *op.cit.*, 445.

Just as there was a “blueprint” (*takhnith*) for the original tabernacle, so is there a law for the house of God in Ezekiel. Further, we should understand this law to be applicable to the church of Messiah’s day (cf. Matthew 16:18). We can trace this theme of the temple/church of Christ through Scripture and see how it ripples from period to period in God’s revelation of his plan of redemption: the outworking of the covenant of grace.

### *An Architect’s Plan*

First, God insists that he alone is the architect of his house. In Exodus 25:8-9 the Lord said to Moses, “Let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them. According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, so shall ye make it.... And look that thou make them after their pattern, which was shewed thee in the mount” (verse 40).

The word translated “pattern” both in verse nine and again in verse 40 is the Hebrew word *tabhnit*. The idea in both places is that of an exemplar or what we might in modern parlance call a blueprint. The author of Hebrews further confirms this idea to us when he states in Hebrews 8:5, “who serve unto the example [*hupodeigma*, i.e. model or pattern] and shadow [*skia*, i.e. foreshadowing] of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern [*tupos*, i.e. form, figure, pattern] shewed to thee in the mount.”

Significantly, God did not leave it to Moses’ imagination or sanctified good will to determine what the Lord’s house would be like. God had a blueprint in heaven and insisted that the blueprint be followed down to the hook and tack. This instruction to follow God’s

own blueprint in building his house will become increasingly important to us as we examine the idea of *jus divinum* (divine right) church polity in the pages that follow.

It will be this author's constant contention that God has not relinquished his right to be the sole architect of church polity and worship. Philosophically this doctrine might be called *sola scriptura*. This author shall maintain that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are sufficient for all of life and godliness; and that is specifically the case when it comes to the proper ordering of God's house.

In Ezekiel's vision of the future and glorious temple of Messiah the Prince, a similar blueprint was unfolded to him by "a man whose appearance was like the appearance of brass." The man of brass measured the slightest of details and described all the measurements to Ezekiel in chapters 40 to 42. He described for Ezekiel the materials as well as the measurements for the temple. The furnishings of the temple, as well as their measurements and composition, were similarly dictated to Ezekiel. Finally, after all the measurements were taken and recorded, the man of brass commanded, "Thou son of man, shew the house to the house of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities: and let them measure the pattern [*takhnit*, i.e. blueprint]. And if they be ashamed of all that they have done, shew them the form [*tsurah*] of the house and the fashion [*tekhunah*, i.e. arrangement or structure] thereof, and the goings out thereof, and the comings in thereof, and all the forms [*tsurah*] thereof, and all the laws thereof: and write it in their sight, that they may keep the whole form [*tsurah*] thereof, and all the ordinances thereof, and do them" (Ezekiel 43:10-11).

There are some commentators — mostly those of a Dispensational or at least Premillennial viewpoint — who regard the “man of brass” to be simply an angelic visitor or some other spiritual intermediary.<sup>[7]</sup> However, given the fact that our Lord Jesus Christ is the Architect and Builder of His church, this author finds it far more likely that the man of brass in Ezekiel’s vision was the pre-incarnate Christ. This also seems to be the view of such Reformed commentators as Matthew Henry, who comments on this passage regarding the man of brass: “The particular discoveries of this city (which he had at first a general view of) were made to him by *a man whose appearance was like the appearance of brass* (v. 3), not a created angel, but Jesus Christ, who should be found in fashion as a man, that he might both discover and build the gospel-temple. He brought him to this city, for it is through Christ that we have both acquaintance with and access to the benefits and privileges of God’s house. He it is that *shall build the temple of the Lord*, Zec. 6:13. His appearing like brass intimates both his brightness and his strength. John, in vision, saw *his feet like unto fine brass*, Rev. 1:15.”<sup>[8]</sup>

The Reverend Henry makes an excellent point, especially with regard to Revelation 1:15. Although it must be conceded that the

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7. Thus the *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible* refers to the man of brass as “some kind of celestial being.” *The Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* by Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown states simply “The Old Testament manifestations of heavenly beings as *men* prepared men’s minds for the coming incarnation.” The *Bible Knowledge Commentary*, which insists that Ezekiel is describing the “millennial temple,” claims only “This tour was given by *a man*, probably an angel, *whose appearance was like bronze*.”

vision Ezekiel received in chapter one pertaining to the angelic creatures also had feet that sparkled like “the colour of burnished brass” (Ezekiel 1:7), later in that same chapter the one who was *above* the throne also had the color of amber and was bright like a fire (verse 27). Ezekiel’s contemporary, the prophet Daniel, had a similar vision of Christ in Daniel 10:5-6. Finally, we must take into consideration the nature of apocalyptic literature. Ezekiel’s vision of the temple, Daniel’s vision of the man clothed in linen at the river Hiddekel, and John’s vision of Christ in Revelation 1:15 have such similarity it would be dangerous indeed to claim that one vision refers to the eternal Son of God while another nearly identical vision refers to some created being.

At the same time we cannot be absolute in our identification of this man of brass as the pre-incarnate Christ for the same reason given above. In Zechariah chapter two and in Revelation chapters eleven and twenty-one, beings that were specifically identified as angels performed actions and functions very similar to the man of brass of Ezekiel chapters forty and following. The angelic beings of those passages are described differently than Ezekiel describes the man of his vision, but we cannot discount completely the idea that it is sometimes an angelic task, and not always the task of the Anointed Architect, to measure the temple.

It was not simply and only in Mosaic times, then, that God’s pattern and form and structure were to be followed. The same must be said for the days of Ezekiel’s vision as well. But as Patrick Fairbairn

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8. Henry, Matthew, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Bible*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997) *in loco*.

well demonstrated in his *Commentary on Ezekiel*, it has been the prevailing view of the Christian church from the Fathers down to now that Ezekiel's vision of the temple was "a grand, complicated symbol of the good God had in reserve for his church, especially under the coming dispensation of the gospel."<sup>(9)</sup>

But the question remains whether there is anything in the church in this present age that corresponds to the *tabhnit* or the *takhnit* or "blueprint" of the Old Testament temple. There are many today, including even some influential persons in conservative Presbyterian denominations<sup>(10)</sup> who would argue that while there was significant form and structure in the Old Testament church, that has passed away in these present days of gospel "liberty."

It is certainly true that the "form" or "blueprint" for the Christian temple is not identical with that of the Old Testament. However, when we have asserted that the blueprint today is not identical to the Old Testament blueprint, we have not asserted the absence of a New Testament blueprint. In fact, by claiming that the form is different we have actually presumed that a New Testament form exists. It will not be suggested in the pages that follow that the form of the Christian temple is as elaborate or ornate as was the temple of the Old Testament. The opposite is the case. The form of the New Testament temple is *by God's design* simpler and plainer (and according to Second Corin-

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9. Fairbairn, *op. cit.*, 443.

10. See below in chapter two of this dissertation for an analysis of one such document from the "Vision2000" caucus within the Presbyterian Church in America.



thians chapter three, more spiritual as well) than that of the Old Testament.

Key to our understanding of the modern-day blueprint for the Christian temple is Ephesians 2:20-22 and Ephesians 3:9-11. Clearly in the second chapter of Ephesians we see a sort of blueprint consisting of a cornerstone (that stone by which all else is placed so as to remain level, straight, and plumb). That cornerstone is none other than Christ himself. Christ is the *rock* upon which the church is built, about which more below in this dissertation. So, too, First Peter 2:6-8 refers to Christ as the rock that was rejected by the builders, but has become the chief cornerstone of the temple of God.

Not only is there a cornerstone, there is a foundation consisting of the apostles and prophets. If we consider that it is not so much the persons of the apostles and prophets in view, but their teachings, we realize that Scripture is the foundation and blueprint for Christ's temple. Finally, we learn from this passage that the building is "fitly framed" to be built together for a habitation to God. The Greek word translated "fitly framed" seems to be limited primarily if not exclusively to the Christian literature. It consists of the prefix for "together" or "with" plus a form of the Greek word "*harmoge*" or "*harmos*," the joint of a building where one stone touches another.

Not only is such a plan presupposed in Ephesians 2:20-22, it is mentioned more explicitly in Ephesians 3:9-11 as belonging to the eternal purpose [*prothesis*] of God. A *prothesis* is not only a plan; it is also the presentation or setting forth of the plan. We might say, then, that the temple of God in all its forms — including the present age of Jew and Gentile being one church — is built upon the eternal blueprint or *prothesis* of God.

### *Preparing the Materials of the Temple*

For any building to arrive at completion, there must be in addition to a plan or blueprint, a preparing and fitting of the materials for the house as well. This fact is as true for the house of Jehovah as for any other house. The tabernacle of God contains the material and ordinances necessary for his worship. God did not set a blueprint before Moses and then tell Moses to consider himself free to take or leave any parts of the *takhnit* as he saw fit. As we saw previously regarding God's blueprint for his tabernacle, his instruction to Moses was "so shall ye make it" (Exodus 25:9) and "look that thou make them after their pattern" (Exodus 25:40).

We should not presume that the Old Testament builders of the house of God were furnished "by nature" to perform their tasks. Rather we must note that God called by name Bezaleel and Aholiab to the work (cf. Exodus 35:30-35). God specifically equipped these men by fitting them with the Spirit of God in wisdom, skill, and understanding. Each man had skill and understanding to build the tabernacle and we have specifically been informed by Scripture that the skill and wisdom that they had came from the Spirit of God as a result of their being filled with the Spirit. These skills constituted an Old Testament type or exemplar of the spiritual gifts of the New Testament by which Christ builds his church today.

Willing and skilled workmen were not sufficient in themselves to complete the task, however. It was also necessary that materials commensurate with God's blueprint be obtained. Thus the materials of the original tabernacle were furnished by the free will offerings of God's people (Exodus 35:4-29). The foundational heart attitude of worship was a willingness to do freely what God had commanded in his word.

The Old Testament people of God were called upon to serve God freely; but their freedom was not absolute. Their freedom was curtailed or bounded by the commandments of God.

Moses was able to say without self-contradiction that the Lord had commanded a particular form to his worship (Exodus 25:40) and at the same time that those who would participate properly in the ordinances of worship must do so from a willing and submissive mind. The reconciliation of these two ideas of a willing submission to commanded forms is found in Exodus 35:29, “The children of Israel brought a willing offering unto the LORD, every man and woman, whose heart made them willing to bring for all manner of work, *which the LORD had commanded to be made* by the hand of Moses.”

We see something similar to this in Ezekiel chapters forty to forty-eight. In Ezekiel 44:9, God told Ezekiel, “No stranger, uncircumcised in heart, nor uncircumcised in flesh, shall enter into my sanctuary, of any stranger that is among the children of Israel.” Only those who entered with circumcised or willing hearts were called to provide service in the temple of the Lord spoken of by Ezekiel the prophet. It is also significant that in Ezekiel’s temple, just as in Moses’ tabernacle, the materials of both the building and the offerings were prescribed by God.

As Bezaleel and Aholiab were called by name and furnished by God’s Spirit to minister to him, so also was the seed of Zadok in the day of Ezekiel’s prophesy (Ezekiel 43:19; 44:15). The seed of Zadok were chosen by God because “they kept the charge of my sanctuary.” God desired willing worshippers, but he required those willing worshippers to submit their wills to “the charge of my sanctuary.” An attempt on the part of the seed of Zadok to worship God in any man-

ner of their own choosing would not have constituted their “keeping the charge of the sanctuary,” but of worshipping according to their own wills. From this we may learn that to worship God willingly is not to worship him as we will, but to submit our wills to the teachings of Scripture – the “blueprint from God.” This also helps us understand why Paul in Colossians 2:23 speaks negatively of will worship (*ethelothreskia*) not as worshipping God voluntarily, but as a self-made or willful religion.

In the New Testament as Christ builds his church or temple we also see him using chosen materials, chosen craftsmen, etc. Once the prescribed foundation and cornerstone have been laid (Ephesians 2:20-22; First Peter 2:6ff; see *supra*), Christ brings his house to completion by making it of living stones. Only Christ, the great master builder, is able to bring dead things to life, for he has life in himself (John 5:26) and gives that everlasting life to whom he will (John 5:21).

As dead stones and dead sacrifices were used to honor God in his appointment in the dispensation of stone (Second Corinthians 3:3) and ministration of death (Second Corinthians 3:7), so in the New Testament (Second Corinthians 3:6) Christ builds his house of living stones (*lithoi*) and spiritual sacrifices (First Peter 2:5). As the master craftsman as well as the heir to the house, Christ has the filling of God’s Spirit without measure (John 3:34). Further, Christ declared himself to be building according to God’s master plan or blueprint (John 4:34; 5:30; 17:4 cf. vv. 21, 25.).

Moses gathered the material for the tabernacle of God by the free-will offerings of God’s people. So, too, does Christ build his temple from free-will offerings. An oft-quoted verse, “thy people shall be

willing in the day of thy power” (Psalm 110:3), has reference to the very willingness of heart to bring a free-will offering as discussed above in Exodus 35:5. This idea of Christ gathering the free-will offerings of his people finds New Testament fulfillment in such places as Second Corinthians 8:5 and Romans 12:1.

Speaking of the free-will monetary offerings of the Macedonian churches, Paul said “and this they did not as we hoped, but first *gave their own selves* to the Lord, and unto us *by the will of God*.” Paul commended those particular churches because of both the spirit *in which* they gave and the rule *by which* they gave. Just as in the days of Moses, Bezaleel, and Aholiab, God’s people in this day are called upon to give generously and biblically to the building of God’s spiritual house. The people were commended in Moses’ day for contributing generously and freely to the building of God’s tabernacle and we see the same sort of commendation of the churches of Macedonia when Paul wrote to the Corinthians of their generosity.

We see, too, that New Testament sacrifice is characterized as living rather than dead animal sacrifice. So Paul relates to the Roman church at Romans 12:1, “present your bodies a *living* sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.” The word that the Authorized Version translated as “service” is the Greek word from which we get the English word “liturgy” (*leiturgia*) and means not just *any* kind of service, but service to God in an *official* capacity.

Moving on, in the same way the tabernacle was wisely framed by Bezaleel and Aholiab, Christ too framed and continues building his church. Not only is this fact evident in a passage we have previously examined (Ephesians 2:20-22), we see it taught in other passages as well. Ephesians 4:16 demonstrates that Christ, as head of his church,

supplies everything the church needs by framing it such that every joint and part contributes effectually to the whole. In a similar manner as Bezaleel and Aholiab were given special wisdom to know how to frame the house of God properly, we understand Christ to *be* the very wisdom of God in building not only the church, but all things (Proverbs 8:22-31). This same teaching, though more under the similitude of a body than a building, is found in Colossians 2:19ff. We have previously alluded to the conclusion that Paul drew from Christ supplying both the blueprint and frame: we must worship God according to *his* blueprint and not according to the dictates of our own wills (Colossians 2:23).

When Moses oversaw the building of God's house, he made an atonement for the house and for all its furnishings. Even though the house was built according to God's plan and framed in accordance with spiritual wisdom and skill, yet it could not be dedicated to God without an atonement being made for it. So the author of Hebrews explained, Moses "sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle, and all the vessels of the ministry. And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission" (Hebrews 9:21-22).

It is important that we understand this principle. Even when we follow God's prescription, it is not our own obedience that brings us into right standing (justification) before the Lord. It is only by the blood that the Old Testament tabernacle was purged (or purified) and it is by his *own* blood that Christ makes the church acceptable to God. The author of Hebrews continued on, "but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judg-

ment: So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many;...” (Hebrews 9:26-28). In our examination of the right way of building Christ’s church, we can never think for one moment that Christ builds his church without viewing it as justified by his own blood. The church, in order to be built according to the blueprint of the eternal architect, must be sprinkled by the precious blood of Christ (Acts 20:28; First Peter 1:18-19).

Finally, we recognize that Moses anointed with oil the tabernacle, its furnishings and its priesthood to the service of God (Exodus 40:9-16). The anointing with prescribed oil was to sanctify or set apart for God’s service. In the case of the tabernacle the only anointing was the unction. In the case of the Aaronic priesthood, there was first a washing followed by an anointing with oil. The anointing of oil was expressive in a typological way of the sanctification of God’s Holy Spirit.

As Moses anointed the tabernacle, its furnishings, and the Aaronic priests with holy or sanctifying oil, so does Christ also sanctify and wash his church by sending the Holy Spirit. Christ explained to his disciples on the eve of his death, “It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart *I will send him* unto you” (John 16:7). The Comforter of whom Christ spoke was the Spirit of truth (John 16:13). Similarly in Ephesians 5:26-27 Paul informed us that Christ *washes* his church as Aaron and his sons were washed in Exodus chapter forty. Christ gave himself for the church for the purpose “that he might *sanctify* and *cleanse* it with the *washing* of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be *holy* and without blemish.”

Moses anointed in order to sanctify typically and symbolically. Christ anoints his church to fulfill that which was foreshadowed by Moses' anointing of the tabernacle. So the church has received an actual unction from Christ, to which John referred when he wrote "the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you; but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him" (First John 2:27). At first glance this passage in First John may appear to teach that no person should teach another. As we shall see below, however, it is the *church considered as the church* that is the habitation of God's Spirit (the anointing).

### *Entrance of the Glory*

As noted above, the point of Ezekiel's vision in the chapters under discussion is that of the returning of the glory of the Lord to the temple (Ezekiel 43:4; 44:4). The glory of the Lord coming to fill the tabernacle was also the culmination of Moses' overseeing the building of the tabernacle. "Then a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter into the tent of the congregation, because the cloud abode thereon, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Exodus 40:34-35). The verb translated as "abode" in verse 35 (*shakhan*) carries in its connotation the idea of a permanent dwelling and seems to form the lexical basis for what is sometimes called the "Shekinah Glory" of the Lord.

There is a similar progression in the building of the original temple in Solomon's day. King David, the prophet, covenantal king, and type of Christ, explained to his son Solomon that God had given him



understanding of the pattern [*tabhnit*] of the permanent house of God in Jerusalem. This house would replace the tabernacle of Moses and would therefore also be subject to receiving its blueprint from heaven. Though David did not enjoy the privilege of actually gathering all the material and overseeing the building of the temple, he was nevertheless given the blueprint which was reduced to writing and then passed along to his son Prince Solomon who undertook the building after David's death (First Chronicles 28:19-21).<sup>(11)</sup>

Additionally the progress of the building of Solomon's temple included the free-will offerings of God's people. "Then the people rejoiced, for that they offered willingly, because with perfect heart they offered willingly to the LORD: and David the king also rejoiced with great joy" (First Chronicles 29:9). The bulk of chapters two through five of Second Chronicles is taken up with the building of Solomon's temple; chapter six with the prayer Solomon prayed at the occasion; and finally in Second Chronicles 7:1-2 Scripture relates: "Now when Solomon had made an end of praying, the fire came down from heaven, and consumed the burnt offering and sacrifices; and the glory of the LORD filled the house. And the priests could not enter into the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD filled the LORD's house." The same event described in Second Chronicles is mentioned also in First Kings 8:10-11 where we learn "the cloud filled the house of the LORD" and "the glory of the LORD had filled the house of the LORD."

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11. See also Second Chronicles 3:3ff. for more details from the blueprint that was reduced to writing.

Appropriate to the study of church polity and worship in this present day, however, is the significant fact that Scripture continues to speak of the church as the dwelling place of the true and living God. As early in his earthly ministry as Matthew 18:20, Christ promised in conjunction with the key of church discipline, “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I *in the midst of them.*” Christ there used a participle for “gathered together” that is reminiscent of the Jewish church’s synagogue (concerning which see *infra* chapter three on terms and definitions). The keys of the Kingdom of God, which keys include church discipline, form an integral part of Christ’s building of his church in this day (see Matthew 16:18-19).

The risen Christ, who from his incarnation made his tabernacle with men (John 1:14) such that we could behold his glory as the only-begotten of the Father, made a similar promise in the end of Matthew’s Gospel where he stated, “and lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Matthew 28:20). Based upon the mediatorial authority of Christ (verse 18), the church is to go by means of its representatives to all the nations and make disciples of them (verse 19). This task of making disciples of the nations the church should accomplish by the two ordinances of baptizing (washing) and teaching the commandments of Christ (verses 19-20).<sup>[12]</sup> The church has no authority either to legislate (make new conscience-binding commandments) or to invent new ordinances of worship. The promise of Christ, then, is to inhabit (be with) his church until the end of time on the basis of the preaching of the true gospel and the right administration of his worship and sacraments.

A further confirmation of this doctrine can be found in the perhaps more explicit words of the Apostle to the Gentiles (nations). Paul

told the Corinthian church, “ye [plural] are God’s husbandry, God’s building [singular]” (First Corinthians 3:9). Paul there referred to the fact that the Corinthian church, as a true church of Christ, was the temple of the living God. Paul asked in verse 16, “Know ye not that ye [plural] are the temple [singular] of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?” The significance of the Spirit of God dwelling within the Corinthian church is an important one, for it demonstrates the chief similarity between the church and the Old Testament temple: the church of the New Testament is the place where God has chosen to *place his name* and where he has chosen to  *dwell* by his Spirit.

Paul continues in verse 17 of the same chapter to inform the Corinthians and us via them, “If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple [singular] ye [plural] are.” In this place the inspired apostle reminds us of the chief law of the temple from Ezekiel 43:12, “this is the law of the house; upon the top of the mountain the whole limit thereof round about shall be most holy. Behold this is the law of the house.” The temple of the Lord was most holy because it was the place where the holy God chose to make his covenantal presence known. Even in Isaiah’s vision in chapter six of his prophecy he saw the pre-incarnate

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12. Clearly men cannot make true disciples by baptizing, teaching or any other physical and human activity. Only the Holy Spirit can make true disciples. Thus we must be baptized by the Holy Spirit and taught of him to be true disciples. But the church makes external disciples by baptizing and teaching. We wish to distance ourselves from the false teaching of Rome that disciples can be made by an *ex opere operato* use of the sacraments. See below in the discussion of the visible/invisible distinction for more details on this idea.

Christ high and lifted up. And in that vision the seraphim encircled Christ, crying out “holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.” John later referred to Isaiah’s vision as “when he saw [Christ’s] glory, and spake of him” (cf. John 12:38-41).

We should not profane the temple of the thrice-holy God by denying in our behavior the truth of the objective and covenantal presence of the holy God with his people.

Christ dwelt (literally, pitched his tabernacle) among us and we beheld his glory, claimed the Apostle John. Paul adds to that fact the incumbent duty all church members have to strive for holiness. When Isaiah beheld the glory and holiness of Christ his response was to cry out, “I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips” (Isaiah 6:5). As we behold the glory and the holiness of the Lord dwelling amongst his people our response should certainly be no less than that of the prophet Isaiah.

The responsibility of God’s people as the holy temple of God is further accentuated by Paul in Second Corinthians 6:16-17, where he quoted from the precept found in Exodus 29:45 and Leviticus 26:11-12. The very essence of God’s covenant, we might say, is found in the fact that God has chosen a people and has chosen *to dwell amongst them*. Thus the very name by which Isaiah called the Mediator of the Covenant of Grace was “Immanuel,” which being interpreted is “God with us” (Isaiah 7:14 cf. Matthew 1:23).

In Second Corinthians 6:16 Paul asked the rhetorical question, “what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?” Lest the Corinthian saints mistakenly assume that Paul wrote of the temple in Jerusalem, he added “for ye [plural] are the temple [singular] of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I

will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Because the church is the holy temple of the living God, it has a duty to reflect that holiness as the “law of the house” (Ezekiel 43:12). Corollary to this duty to be holy even as God is holy is the further responsibility to acknowledge Christ as the sole Lawgiver and King in his church (James 4:12; Matthew 28:18-20). This dissertation hopes to draw out some of the implications of the glory of Christ and the holiness of Christ inhabiting the holy temple of his church.

From the preceding considerations, we come to the following conclusions:

(1). Ezekiel 40:2 uses the symbolism of a high mountain to signify the church’s future *glory* (Hebrews 12:22ff; cp. Ezekiel 17:22-23; Psalm 48:3, 43; 68:17; Revelation 21:10).

(2). Ezekiel 43 contains the entrance of the glory of the Lord into his new temple.

(3). Ezekiel 47:22-23 indicates that foreigners (strangers) will be placed on the same ecclesiastical footing with the Jews. For the fulfillment of this prophecy see Galatians 3:28 and Ephesians 2:14.

(4). Both the tabernacle and the temple were significant symbols in both the Old Testament and the New Testament for the glorious church of the Lord Jesus Christ (Hebrews 12:22ff.; Psalm 22:6; 27:4; 84:4; Ephesians 2:19; First Timothy 3:15; Second Corinthians 6:16; First Corinthians 3:17).

### *The Prince of Ezekiel*

Ezekiel’s vision of the temple of the latter days includes not only the entrance or return of the glory of the Lord; he also saw Christ com-

ing to his church as the King, or Prince, of the church. Christ shall come indeed to the throne of his kingdom and central to this idea is Ezekiel's vision of the coming Prince. A portion of the land of inheritance (the idealized nation of God) shall be for the Prince in such a way that it surrounds and protects the holy mountain of God. "And a portion shall be for the Prince on the one side and on the other side of the oblation of the holy portion...and the length shall be over against one of the portions from the west border unto the east border" (Ezekiel 45:7).

### *Identifying Ezekiel's Prince/Priest*

Moreover, this Prince will be one who not only occupies the throne of his kingdom, but unlike other kings or princes of Israel, he will prepare the various offerings "to make reconciliation for the house of Israel" (Ezekiel 45:17). We should understand this Prince of whom Ezekiel wrote as different from an "ordinary prince of the realm." He will be a Prince who is also a Priest. King Uzziah attempted to burn incense upon the altar of incense in God's house and was resisted both by the priests and by God (Second Chronicles 26:16ff.). The coming King will not only burn incense, as King Uzziah was prohibited from doing, Ezekiel reported that he will go so far as to make reconciliation (*piel binyan* of the Hebrew verb "*kaphar*"). The sanctuary will be so located, according to Ezekiel's prophetic geography that it will stand in the very midst of the Prince's house (Ezekiel 48:21).

We conclude, therefore, that the Prince of whom Ezekiel wrote prophetically is none other than the Prince of Peace himself. When the city and the temple and the land are restored in accordance with the

meaning of Ezekiel's vision, the glory of the Lord will dwell there and the place will then be known as *Jehovah-Shammah* (the LORD is thither). This Prince can be none other than the one who is a Priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (Psalm 110:4). Melchizedek, we recall, was not only Priest of the Most High God; he was also King of Salem (i.e. "King of Peace" or "King of Jerusalem" or both). See Genesis 14:18 and much of the book of Hebrews, to be discussed in greater detail below.

Earlier in his prophecies Ezekiel referred to Christ also under the symbolism of King David, another Old Testament "type" of Christ. Ezekiel in chapter thirty-four reported the words of Jehovah thus: "And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd. And I the LORD will be their God, and my servant David *a prince* among them; I the LORD have spoken it" (Ezekiel 34:23-24).

Of course the reference in Ezekiel chapter thirty-four is not to the original King David, but to David's greater son. We say "David's greater son" in referring to the coming Prince because in the same Psalm in which Messiah was called "a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek," David referred to him as "m'lord" (Hebrew *'adonai*), a term not only of respect, but of actual and official superiority.

Christ, during his earthly ministry, referred Psalm 110 to Messiah the Prince and posed this very puzzle. He asked the Pharisees, who had previously confessed that Messiah was the son of David after the flesh (Matthew 22:42 cp. Romans 1:3), how David could by the Spirit of God call Messiah "m'lord." Christ put the question this way, "If David then call him Lord, how is he his son" (Matthew 22:45). Christ set forth the importance of what has come to be known as the doctrine

of Christ's hypostatic union. Messiah is not merely a descendent of David; he is also the Son of God. As such, he is David's *greater* Son and the Shepherd and Prince spoken of by Ezekiel.

Not only did Ezekiel characterize the greater David as a Shepherd (see John 10:11ff.), but also as the Prince Servant of Jehovah who will be the eternal Prince of his people. "And David my servant shall be king over them; and they all shall have one shepherd: they shall also walk in my judgments, and observe my statutes, and do them" (Ezekiel 37:24).

Both of the genealogies of Christ contained in the New Testament go to some pains to demonstrate that Jesus Christ, according to his humanity, was descended from King David (Matthew 1:1, 6; Luke 3:31-32). What is the significance of Christ's genealogy at this point? It was given by the Holy Spirit in order to demonstrate that our Lord is that Prince promised in the Davidic covenant; viz., the Prince of Ezekiel; he is that greater David; he is that one of whom the Psalmist claimed, "I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant, thy seed will I establish for ever, and build up thy throne to all generations. Selah" (Psalm 89:3-4).

Peter also understood Jesus Christ to be Messiah the Prince spoken of prophetically throughout the Old Testament. Peter, in fact, claimed that Christ was the "David" of the Psalms, understood prospectively, for the Old Testament saint. In his inspired sermon on the day of Pentecost Peter proclaimed boldly, "Therefore [David] being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ *to sit on his throne*; he seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see cor-



ruption” (Acts 2:30-31). The same Prince that Ezekiel and David foresaw sitting on the throne of his kingdom (Ezekiel 45:7), Peter declared by inspiration of the Holy Ghost to be Jesus Christ in his resurrection and ascension through the heavens to the holy of holies and his own throne (see also Hebrews 4:14-16).

Thus as Edward Mack rightly stated in his definitive work on *The Christ of the Old Testament*, “So Ezekiel keeps in line with all the prophets in proclaiming ‘the sure mercies of David’; the inviolability of the Messianic Covenant, which Jehovah made with David,”<sup>{13}</sup> and which was, of course, fulfilled in the life, death, and ongoing session of Jesus Christ.

### *The Gospel According To Ezekiel*

Several considerations present themselves, then, from our brief consideration of Ezekiel chapters forty to forty-eight. A right understanding of the church and a right understanding of the gospel are nearly always tied together. On the other hand, false views of church government and the gospel have also gone together historically. As Professor Stuart Robinson insightfully stated in his nineteenth century work on the subject:

“Making all due allowance for exceptions arising out of the inconsistencies of individual minds, as a general rule, it is found true that bodies of men (always more consistent, and more apt to be governed by the necessities of

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13. Edward Mack, *The Christ of the Old Testament* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1926), 115.

an inexorable logic, than individual minds) if holding any special views in theology, have corresponding views, right or wrong, of the idea and nature of the Church; and, *vice versa*, if peculiar views of the Church, then also corresponding views of theology. Thus, a Rationalistic theology is most commonly found in connection with an Erastian or an Independent theory of the Church. On the other hand, a Prelatical theory of the Church almost uniformly stands in connection with a theology of mere sacramentalism. A Calvinistic theology seldom remains long incorrupt except as held in connection with a Presbyterian theory of the church.”<sup>{14}</sup>

Similar to Professor Robinson’s observation, there is also a close correlation between the church and the gospel in the visions of God contained in Ezekiel’s prophecies. It is only *as the church proclaims the gospel* of Messiah the Prince that she is or becomes the high mountain filled with the glory of the LORD. Because the Lord refuses to share his glory with any other (Isaiah 42:8; 48:11 cp. Isaiah 6:3), the glory of the Lord fills his temple only as his people cast off the idols of human imaginations and proclaim the gospel of the true and living God faithfully and fervently. Thus we assert first of all that the glory of the LORD is present in the temple only when the gospel of Jesus Christ is preached faithfully. Otherwise a so-called church is no temple of Christ, but a Baal house.

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14. Stuart Robinson, *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel*, (Greenville, SC: GPTS Press, 1995 reprint of Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1858), 33.

Second, the full display of the glory of the LORD's temple is from the holiness of the mount on which it sits. Thus the gospel that is preached in the temple of Ezekiel's prophecy must be a gospel of repentance. As God grants repentance to his people and takes the supreme place in their lives, his glory is seen in their works of repentance (Matthew 5:16, 20).

This, in turn, leads to the important observation that the distinguishing character of the temple of God as it is restored in Christ is an all-pervading holiness and sanctity. The Scottish divine Patrick Fairbairn taught us as much in his Commentary on this place in Ezekiel. The law of the house "consisted in the whole region of the temple mount being most holy. Not, as hitherto, was this characteristic to be confined to a single apartment of the temple; it was to embrace the entire circumference occupied by the symbolical institutions of the kingdom.... All were to have one character of sacredness, because all connected with them were to occupy a like position of felt nearness to God, and equally to enjoy the privilege of access to him."<sup>15</sup>

Carl F. Keil also expressed the same idea in his introduction to the section of Ezekiel's prophecies that run from 43:13 through 46:24. In the section which Keil characterized under the title "The New Ordinances of Divine Worship," he commented pointedly, "But if the abode of Jehovah in the midst of His people was to have an eternal duration, Israel must *turn in uprightness of heart* to its God, and suffer itself to be renewed and sanctified in heart, mind, and spirit from within the sanctuary, through the mercy of the Lord and His Spirit. It must entirely renounce the idols to which it was formerly attached,

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15. Fairbairn, *op. cit.*, 481-82.

and cherish with willingness of heart fellowship with its God in the temple, through the faithful fulfillment of all that He required of His people.”<sup>{16}</sup>

Finally, this New Testament temple of Christ is a thoroughgoing theocracy—or perhaps more accurately said, it is a thoroughgoing “Christocracy.” It has a single lawgiver (legislator) and that legislator is the eternal Christ himself (James 4:12). The preaching of the gospel in this age is therefore represented in Scripture as the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom, which has as its foundational command “repent ye.” This was the gospel that began to be preached by the herald of the king (Matthew 3:1-2), “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” So too was it the gospel preached by the King himself after John was thrown in prison, “From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” (Matthew 4:17).

The Westminster *Confession of Faith* scripturally recognizes that the church is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ (or as Matthew reports it, the kingdom of heaven) at Confession 25:2.<sup>{17}</sup> Fairbairn, too recognized this to be the case in Ezekiel when he commented, “So that the pattern delineated is that of a true theocracy, having God himself for king, with the community in all its members for true denizens (citizens) of the kingdom, and acceptable ministers of righteousness before the Lord.”<sup>{18}</sup>

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16. Keil, *op.cit.*, 283. (emphasis added)

17. WCF XXV.2, *Confession*, 108.

18. Fairbairn, *op. cit.*, 482.

### *Implications for Church Polity*

When God's people repent and know the shamefulfulness of their sins, *then* God shows them the form of his house, as Ezekiel 43:11 states. It is the duty of His people, then, to become acquainted with the rules and duties of His house. God shows His people the ordinances of His house so that they may observe and do them (Deuteronomy 29:29 cf. Matthew 28:19). Matthew Henry has well expressed the privilege and duty of believers who live in the day of Ezekiel's temple and the relationship the privileges and duties bear to one another:

“1. The whole church shall have the privilege of the *holy of holies*, that of a near access to God. All believers have now, under the gospel, *boldness to enter into the holiest* (Hebrews x.19), with this advantage, that whereas the high priest entered in virtue of the blood of bulls and goats, we enter in the virtue of the blood of Jesus, and, wherever we are, we have through him *access to the Father*. 2. The whole church shall be under a mighty obligation to press toward the perfection of holiness, *as he who has called us is holy*. All must now be most holy. *Holiness becomes God's house* for ever, and in gospel-times more than ever. Behold this is the *law of the house*; let none expect the protection of it that will not submit to this law.”<sup>{19}</sup>

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19. Matthew Henry, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.), Volume 4 *Isaiah to Malachi*, 993.

The holiness of God’s house, then, consists primarily in a willing submissiveness and obedience to God’s commandments for the house and the people of the house. The holiness of God’s house is directly related to the law of the house because it is obedience to the law of the house that manifests its holy character and the sanctified character of its people. Surely it was this passage that gave Thomas Witherow the idea for the title of his large book on the subject of Presbyterian church government. He titled his volume *The Form of the Christian Temple*<sup>(20)</sup> because the government of the Presbyterian Church, as it is *jus divinum*, is nothing less or more than an application of Ezekiel 43:11 to the Christian Temple.

However, constitutional Presbyterianism does not stop with the statement that the church must submit to and obey the law of the house. It goes on to insist that the church may do *only* what is contained in the law of the house. Because there is but one legislator in the church, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the officers of the church may not bind the consciences of God’s people with their own commandments, doctrines, or traditions. The southern Presbyterian theologian James Henley Thornwell has explained this principle of church government as clearly and succinctly as anyone:

“As under the old dispensation nothing connected with the worship or discipline (or government) of the church of God was left to the wisdom or discretion of

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20. Thomas Witherow, *The Form of the Christian Temple: Being A Treatise on the Constitution of the New Testament Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889), 468 pp. Hereafter *Temple*.

man, but everything was accurately prescribed by the authority of God, so, under the new, no voice is to be heard in the household of faith but the voice of the Son of God. The power of the church is purely ministerial and declarative. She is only to hold forth the doctrine, enforce the laws, and execute the government which Christ has given her. She is to add nothing of her own to, and to subtract nothing from, what her Lord has established. Discretionary power she does not possess.”<sup>{21}</sup>

By the law of the house Christ the king and legislator, whose glory fills his house, governs everything in his house — its structure, the entrances and exits and where they shall be, all the house’s designs, its statutes and all its laws. The law of God’s house is written in the Bible as the infallible and all-sufficient revelation of the will and character of God. The entire church throughout all ages, therefore, may observe its whole design and all its statutes, and do them. It is the law of the house.

### *The Point of This Exposition*

The point of this dissertation is that a church that is faithful to God and to his Word is a church that is Reformed in her theology and Presbyterian in her government and organization. To the extent that Presbyterianism is found in the pages of Scripture, it must be obeyed. Everything in Scripture—every doctrine and precept—is a matter of

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21. James H. Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, John B. Adger and John L. Girardeau, eds. (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publications, 1873), IV.163. Hereafter *Thornwell*.

faith and must therefore be believed and obeyed. The government of the church is no exception to the rule. We must not think that God has taken the trouble to inspire the record of such small details as the very gestures of the men who preached the gospel in Bible times, but has left out something so critical as the law of his own house. That would not only be an unwarranted presumption, it will be the purpose of this dissertation to demonstrate that it is a false one as well.<sup>{22}</sup>

We do not claim that the form of church government must be believed unto salvation (though we do claim that saving faith does not reject any clear teaching of Scripture and that it is a sinful avoiding of Scripture teaching that leads to false views of church government).<sup>{23}</sup> We do understand that there is a difference between those essentials of the faith that are necessary to be believed to the saving of the soul and those less fundamental and less foundational building blocks of doctrine that are not directly related to our salvation. We agree with Thomas Witherow's statement in his booklet *The Apostolic Church: Which Is It?*: "There is such a thing as being a Presbyterian without being a Christian, as it is possible to be a Christian without being a Presbyterian. Depend upon it, it is best to be both."<sup>{24}</sup>

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22. This dissertation covers the basic philosophy and theology of ecclesiology. It is the author's hope to follow this work with a second volume covering the details of ecclesiology or the polity of Scripture in its particulars.

23. See WCF XIV:2, *Confession*, 63-64.

24. Thomas Witherow, *The Apostolic Church: Which Is It?* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1990), 61. (Hereafter *The Apostolic Church*)



More shall be said below on the subject of the importance of our study. But surely it is clear that anything that God has revealed in his Word has an importance attached to it by virtue of being divine revelation. As Witherow pointed out nearly a century and a half ago, “Let a man once persuade himself that importance attaches only to what he is pleased to call essentials, whatever their number, and he will, no doubt, shorten his creed and cut away the foundation of many controversies; but he will practically set aside all except a very small part of the Scriptures. If such a principle does not mutilate the Bible, it stigmatizes much of it as trivial. Revelation is all gold for preciousness and purity, but the very touch of such a principle would transmute the most of it into dross.”<sup>{25}</sup>

## ***IDEAS AND TERMINOLOGY***

### ***Constitutional Presbyterianism***

This dissertation on biblical church government previously used the term “*jus divinum*.” We should not understand by that term that every last nuance of the exercise of church government is by divine right; nor should we understand that literally *everything* that all Presbyterian bodies have done has the stamp of approval of God’s authority. The constitutional Presbyterian maintains, as does his constitution, “that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to

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25. *Ibid.*, 8.

be observed,” (Westminster Confession of Faith, I.6).<sup>{26}</sup> Nevertheless, while some *circumstances* such as the number of elders in a local congregation or the bounds of a presbytery may be ordered such, the church has no authority in herself to invent new offices not contained in Scripture nor to secure for herself any authority over the consciences of God’s people apart from the Word of God.

Further, this dissertation will be proposing in chapter eight a view of church government that might be characterized as either Constitutional Presbyterianism or Presbyterian Minimalism. Basically, Presbyterian Minimalism is the view that the church may only claim a *jus divinum* for acts that are specifically (whether by explicit or implicit warrant) designated as proper church acts by Scripture alone. One simple example would be the existence of a standing moderator of a church assembly (court). There is no basis scripturally to think that the moderator of a presbytery or a synod should continue to be the moderator of something that is not meeting and hence requires no moderating or presiding. It is precisely in failing to follow this simple rule of minimalism that much of the mischief in American Presbyterianism has arisen. This dissertation does not claim that nothing may be regarded in a circumstantial way without Scripture warrant. It claims, rather, that such circumstances may not be imposed with the authority of a *jus divinum*, but can only claim for themselves the same place as any historical or circumstantial edict that is subject to change as the case or need changes.<sup>{27}</sup>

This author recognizes that there are conservative denominations in this country that maintain not only standing moderators but even

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26. WCF I.6, *Confession*, 22-23.

permanent committees. Such committees have become generally indistinguishable from independent or quasi-independent boards, however. It is the position of this dissertation that such practices as standing moderators and committees detract from a truly biblical Presbyterianism. They are *at best* merely circumstances of government and *at worst* undermine biblical polity. They have historically been precursors to one level and degree or another of apostasy. Rather, all the authority that Christ has given his church—which will be discussed in some detail in the pages to follow—resides in the *jus divinum* and not in the circumstances of church government. The circumstances of government may be useful for a season, but where a particular circumstance has *outlived its usefulness* it should be discarded: discarded with some considerable honor and respect no doubt, but discarded nonetheless.

### ***Three Fundamental Ideas***

Three ideas surface repeatedly through discussions of church polity because they belong to the very fundamentals (the *sine qua non*) of biblical or constitutional Presbyterian church government. The first idea is that of the parity or equality of all the ministers of the Word and sacraments. Biblical Presbyterianism rejects as destructive of church polity the unbiblical idea of one minister having a greater authority of office than any other. Whether we find it in Romanism, Prelacy, or Methodism, the principle of one minister being “a pastor of pastors” is foreign and even anathema to constitutional Presbyterian-

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27. See the present Author’s work against the Steelite error, entitled “Their Defense is Departed,” appendix one below.

ism. There are no “bishops” in the prelatiic sense of that word in the Presbyterian churches. A man who ministers in a small country church has the same standing in his presbytery as does the minister of a large city congregation. Thus diocesan bishops have no place at all in a Presbyterian system.

A second important and fundamental *jus divinum* feature of constitutional Presbyterianism is the fact that the government of the church is vested in ruling elders. This biblical form of church government helps to insure the church against the encroachments of ministerial ambitions. In a perfect world with perfect people ministers would constantly remember their role as servants of Christ and his church. But, alas, we live in a world much affected by the fall of man. God has therefore, in his wisdom, not deposited church authority in the hands of a single man or the hands of men who might think there is some advantage to themselves in abusing the authority. Ecclesiastical authority is from Christ via representatives of his people. While other forms of church government may have men in office whom they designate as ruling elders or lay elders, it is a part of the genius of Presbyterian church government that has these biblical officers as active participants in church government *at every level*. Ideally in fact, biblical Presbyterianism would be governed in such a way that ruling elders would *normally* outnumber ministers in any given governing assembly.

A third and final principle of biblical Presbyterianism is that of the confederacy of like-minded churches. As much as possible Presbyterian churches attempt to demonstrate the unity of the church by connection with other churches. However, in order to be true to the first principle — that the church is finally to be governed by the Word

of God alone — connectionalism must arise from unity and not the other way around. Many well-meaning Presbyterians in our history have regarded connectionalism to be an end in itself rather than a spiritual by-product of doctrinal and practical unity. The result has been tyranny even in a church system that is designed by the Lord to exclude all tyranny. As Thomas M’Crie, the Constitutional Presbyterian, maintained in his foundational work on church unity, “A vague and erratic charity, which soars above fixed principles of belief, looks down with neglect on external ordinances, and spurns the restraint of ordinary rules, whether it seeks to include all Christians within its catholic embrace, or confines itself to those of a favorite class, is a very feeble and precarious bond of union. True Christian charity is the daughter of truth, and fixes her objects ‘for the truth’s sake which dwells in them.’”<sup>[28]</sup>

While this idea of church government may sound foreign to the ears of those used to hearing of permanent committees, boards, or stated moderators, it is actually the historical understanding of Presbyterianism. As Samuel Miller has well stated in his monumental *Presbyterianism: The Truly Primitive and Apostolical Constitution of the Church*, “The Presbyterian Church claims to derive her form of government from the Holy Scriptures.”<sup>[29]</sup> It is only as the Presbyterian

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28. Thomas M’Crie, *The Unity of the Church* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1989 edition of Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1821), 25.

29. Samuel Miller, *Presbyterianism: The Truly Primitive And Apostolical Constitution Of The Church Of Christ*, (Dallas: Presbyterian Treasury, 1998 reprint of Presbyterian Board of Publications, 1835), 45.

Church *forgets* that she is to derive all her government from Scripture that she gets into trouble. And at that very point, this author would claim, she also ceases to be Presbyterian. Miller further agrees on the three fundamental distinctive ideas of Presbyterianism as well and that all three are derived from Scripture: “She is persuaded that the New Testament most distinctly presents, as existing in the Apostolic Church, all the three features which constitute the peculiarities (distinctives) of her ecclesiastical polity, (church government), *viz.* the parity (equality) of her ministers; the government of the church by ruling elders (representative); and the attainment of the unity and cooperation by courts of review and control (connectionalism and confederacy). She aims to avoid the unauthorized pretensions of prelacy (Episcopal church government) on the one hand, and the lax, inadequate scheme of independency (congregational church government) on the other; and to adopt that system of ministerial equality, and efficient representation in the government of the church, which at once guards, as far as possible, against the encroachments of clerical (ministerial) ambition; secures the rights of the people, and provides for the exercise of pure and wholesome discipline in the most edifying manner.”<sup>{30}</sup>

This constitutional idea of *jus divinum* or Presbyterian Minimalism is not much practiced today, it is true. One important purpose in writing this dissertation is to demonstrate that modern Presbyterianism has to a great extent lost sight of its roots and then to recall it to the principle of *Scripture alone being the law of the house*. We desire to see the glory of the Lord once again fill his temple, but it also is our

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30. *Ibid.*

conviction that this will not happen until such time as Presbyterian office holders become “ashamed of their iniquities,” in adding to the Word of God and learn once again to “measure the pattern” of the house of Jehovah in accordance with the law of the house—*Sola Scriptura* (Ezekiel 43:10).

## 2. IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

### *IMPORTANCE*

#### *Church Organization Not Indifferent*

This dissertation touched somewhat upon the importance of the study of the biblical doctrine of the church in the previous chapter, the introduction to this dissertation. From earliest times Christians have confessed “I believe an holy catholic church.”<sup>{31}</sup> According to Philip Schaff, the original (“old Roman form”) Apostles’ Creed stated merely, “I believe...the Holy Church.” Thus the term “catholic” has no place in the creed prior to the close of the fourth century.<sup>{32}</sup> But the western church as well as the eastern has always regarded the existence of the church to be a creedal matter — i.e., a matter belonging to the faith and confessions of the church itself. It may seem strange in an age that considers any doctrine over which men differ to be unimportant at best and sectarian at worst, that this dissertation would regard the doctrine of the church to be one that not only should attract the attention of seminary professors and students, but even demands the attention of all Christians. This claim regarding the importance of our study this dissertation shall set forth under at least three reasons.

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31. Philip Schaff *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993 reprint of 1931 Harper and Row edition), 21-22.

32. *Ibid.*



### *A Matter of Divine Revelation*

First, the doctrine of the church is a subject of divine revelation. Surely we dare not say that anything that is a matter of revelation from God lacks importance. It may not be central to our lives, but God was pleased to reveal the fact that Paul left his cloak in Troas (Second Timothy 4:13). If it has pleased God to reveal a matter to us, then it is our duty to believe it and to practice it (Deuteronomy 29:29). As Thomas Peck devoutly observed over a century ago in his *Notes on Ecclesiology*, recently republished by Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, “The doctrine of the church belongs to the things which have been revealed of God, and are, therefore, objects of faith.”<sup>(33)</sup> It seems more than a little odd to this author that there are men in Presbyterian denominations who deny a significant level of importance to the very idea and doctrine that gives their denomination a distinct name.

Herman Hoeksema, the Protestant Reformed author of *Reformed Dogmatics*, makes the very same claim that the church is an article of faith precisely because it is revealed in Scripture by the breath of the Spirit. Hoeksema demonstrated that by his confession that he “believes an holy catholic church,” the confessor is stating:

“That the church is an object of his faith, the existence and nature and calling of which is to be determined not from experience, not by human philosophy, not by observation of the actually existing churches in the world,

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33. T. E. Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology*, (Greenville, SC: Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Press, 1994, Reprint of 1892), 8.

but only from revelation, i.e., from the Word of God as contained in the Holy Scriptures. Just as the church confesses, ‘I believe in God, I believe in Jesus Christ, I believe in the Holy Ghost, I believe the forgiveness of sins, I believe the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting,’ so also she declares, ‘I believe an holy, catholic church.’”<sup>{34}</sup>

We shall consider in more detail in the next section the relationship of the doctrine of the church to the doctrine of salvation and how that relationship contributes to the importance of this study. But even in considering the idea and doctrine of the church as something not essential to salvation, the consideration does not make the doctrine of no importance because it is not amongst those things that must be believed unto salvation. In the work previously cited by Thomas Witherow — his *The Apostolic Church: Which Is It?* — we read:

“Though every statement in the Scripture cannot be regarded as absolutely essential to salvation, yet everything there is essential to some other wise and important end, else it would not find a place in the good Word of God. Human wisdom may be baffled in attempting to specify the design of every truth that forms a component part of the Divine revelation, but eternity will show us that no portion of it is useless. All Scripture is profitable. A fact written therein may not be essential to human salvation, and yet it may be highly conducive to some other

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34. Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), 571.

great and gracious purpose in the economy of God — it may be necessary for our personal comfort, for our guidance in life, or for our growth in holiness, and most certainly it is essential to the completeness of the system of Divine truth. The law of the Lord is perfect. Strike out of the Bible the truth that seems the most insignificant of all, and the law of the Lord would not be perfect any more.”<sup>{35}</sup>

Thomas Peck was of a similar opinion. In the same work cited above, Peck claimed not only that the doctrine of the church was not unimportant, but he further asserted that next to the glory of God itself, the doctrine of the church is possibly the chief doctrine in all of Scripture. He stated, “[The doctrine of the church] is the highest end, next to the glory of God, of all the counsels and all the works of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost...for transcending in glory the old creation, over which the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy, as the second Adam, who is a quickening Spirit, transcends in glory the first Adam, who was but a living soul.”<sup>{36}</sup> We shall examine in the next section the importance of the church as the Divine Institution and see that Peck simply reflects the view of most historic Presbyterians.

Thus it came to pass in the very year that Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary was reprinting Peck’s *Notes* that a sizeable caucus within the Presbyterian Church in America published its so-called

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35. Witherow, *The Apostolic Church*, 8.

36. Peck, *op. cit.*, 8.

*PCA Consensus*.<sup>[37]</sup> The *PCA Consensus* consisted primarily of a series of affirmations and denials, some of which dealt with the subject of church polity.

The authors of the *PCA Consensus* did well, in this writer's opinion, to bring the discussion of church polity to the table.<sup>[38]</sup> However, there were portions of the *PCA Consensus* statements and denials regarding church polity that were so vague as to be dangerous and others that were simply unbiblical and therefore not Presbyterian. The *PCA Consensus* denied, for example, "that the Church can effectively serve Christ if she irresponsibly opposes and criticizes her leaders privately and publicly; we further deny that the Church can effectively serve Christ if she seeks to function like a democracy, with no recognized and empowered leadership."<sup>[39]</sup>

As pious as such a statement appears to be on the surface, it could quickly and easily become a justification for ecclesiastical tyranny. Surely the PCA does not think its "leaders" are above criticism. Who will be the ones to determine whether criticism of the leadership is responsible or irresponsible? Certainly, as we shall see in its proper place below, we have a duty and an important responsibility to "obey them that have the rule" in the church. In that context, of course, we must "consider the end of their conversation," i.e. whether they have

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37. *PCA Consensus: A Proposed Statement of Identity for the Presbyterian Church in America* (privately published and distributed by the Vision2000 Caucus of the PCA).

38. *Ibid.*, IV.13-17.

39. *Ibid.*, 15.

conducted themselves according to their office. The office in view in Hebrews chapter thirteen, however, is clearly that of a pastor or teaching elder — not a coordinator, president, or permanent committee member.<sup>{40}</sup>

The importance of a study such as this one, then, lies partly in the fact that these are so-called leaders in conservative Presbyterian denominations who are either ignorant of Presbyterian principles or who have chosen willfully to ignore those principles. Responsible criticism should be welcomed in the PCA and every Presbyterian denomination by those who have been designated the servants (ministers) of God’s people. The *PCA Consensus* denial is seen as even more ominous, however, when we read it in the context of its explanatory paragraph: “The coordinators and presidents and the permanent committee members whom the General Assembly elects should be able to exercise the leadership roles for which they have been chosen without unwarranted suspicion and criticism. The PCA will be held together, and will be effective, in all her courts, by mutual love and trust, not merely by the rule of law.”<sup>{41}</sup>

We must notice in unpacking this statement that it is not biblical church officers that the *PCA Consensus* regards as above criticism (though that would be bad enough), but “coordinators and presidents and the permanent committee members.” But additionally, and even more disconcerting to a constitutional Presbyterian, is the disregard

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40. See Hebrews 13:7, 17 where leaders or rulers are characterized as those who “spoke the Word of God.”

41. *PCA Consensus*, 16.

the whole document seems to have even for the rule of law. Are these Prelates (whether called “President” or “Coordinator,” it comes to the same thing as “Prelate”) not only above criticism; should they also be regarded as above the law as well? A key reason we have rules and procedures is that God has told us that the human heart is deceitful and desperately wicked and that we therefore cannot trust it (Jeremiah 17:9). The very reason we have accountability and safeguards built into our system of government — and this is much of the genius of Presbyterianism — is that we do *not* deny the biblical doctrine of total depravity. We properly understand that fallen human nature, even in its regenerated state, remains capable of sins of the worst kind. It is, in fact, *because* Presbyterians love their brethren that they desire for the brethren to remain accountable to the rule of law.

“Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if *there be* any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love *is* the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:8-10).

Interestingly, after referring to the ministerial assemblies of the PCA as “courts” for four pages, the *PCA Consensus* finally set forth a denial “that our session meetings, presbytery meetings, and general assemblies should be adequately and fully described by the term ‘church courts.’”<sup>{42}</sup> It is difficult to say whether the *PCA Consensus* is correct in this denial without knowing what is intended by the terms

“adequately” and “fully” in this context. These two words are certainly not synonyms, so while it may be the case that ministerial assemblies cannot *fully* be described as courts, it is hardly the same as saying that one may not *adequately* to some purpose describe them as courts. The *PCA Consensus*, however, complains, “Our description of session, presbyteries, and the General Assembly as ‘Church courts’ tends to place the emphasis on judicial matters and rules of procedure rather than on worship, fellowship, and ministry.”<sup>(43)</sup>

While there is nothing in constitutional Presbyterianism that *prevents* biblical worship, fellowship, and ministry from taking place at a meeting of a ministerial assembly, those activities are not the primary reasons for the assembly to take place and would best be considered under circumstances of government rather than under the *jus divinum* of Presbyterianism. More will be said on the purpose and authority of ministerial assemblies below, especially in the chapter on Presbyterian Minimalism. However, given the fact that the *PCA Consensus* seems to regard “leaders” as those members, presidents, and coordinators of permanent committees who should be above criticism and above the rule of law, this writer has some concern that there would be a tendency to turn the church courts into an ecclesiastical version of the “happenings” of the 1960s. At the same time, the proposed “Statement of Identity” would turn the “real work” of Christ’s church over to the “leaders” who supposedly should be trusted more than the rules.

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42. *Ibid.*, 17.

43. *Ibid.*

A study such as this one gains a part of its importance, then, from the fact that even regenerate men often desire to place human wisdom above divine wisdom and the supposed liberty of the Christian conscience above the right of a sovereign God to order his own church. This study proposes to be a challenge to unbiblical church government disguising itself as Presbyterianism. Unbiblical church government was at the foundation of many of the abuses that eventually made the Protestant Reformation a necessity. What may seem to be a small and even innocuous change (innovation) in church government can lead to all manner of abuses in subsequent generations. Those who call themselves presidents and coordinators today may well be taking to themselves the role and title of “bishop” and “pastor of pastors” in time. Only by knowing and believing and practicing the Word of God — especially what the Word says respecting church polity — can such tyranny be either prevented or overthrown. There is, after all, a pope in each man’s heart. Ecclesiastical leaders are no more immune from such temptations than any man is. It is only by understanding and returning to constitutional Presbyterianism that we have any hope of preventing the abuses of days gone by.

### ***The Church As A Divine Institution***

The second reason we should adduce regarding the importance of our present examination of the biblical doctrine of the church is the fact that the church itself is an institution of divine origin. We shall distinguish in the pages that follow, as most Presbyterians have done for many years, between the invisible church and the visible church. But we must be very careful with such distinctions, so that we do not give the impression that one is of divine origin and the other merely a



human or voluntary society of men who are free to organize themselves in any way they choose.

Samuel Rutherford, one of the Scottish commissioners to the Westminster Assembly, claimed that the external ordinances and the external government of the church are of divine origin as much as is the institution of the church itself. In his *Divine Right of Church Government and of Excommunication* Rutherford stated, “Hence also I argue for the immutability of a scriptural platform, that the church cannot alter at her will: thus, that must be of Divine institution which is an essential part of the gospel; but the platform of church-government in the word is such, and so must be no less immutable than the gospel.”<sup>{44}</sup>

The church, then, is sometimes more visible and sometimes less visible, but it would be a grave error to think that there are two churches or two bodies of Christ or two peoples of God as surely as it would be wrong to think that there are two Christs or two Holy Spirits. The church *as the church* is of Divine origin. We must not think, for example, that the invisible church is built upon Christ while the visible church is built upon Peter. Likewise it would be a serious misreading of Scripture to think that calling, faith, and holiness are always and exclusively the province of the invisible church, for there are externals that relate directly to each of these ideas and which will be discussed

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44. Samuel Rutherford *The Divine Right of Church Government and of Excommunication* (London: John Field, 1646), 15-16. Spelling and punctuation edited to reflect modern usage.

below under the proper distinction that must be made between the visible and invisible regarding the church of Christ.

The primary reason for the Reformed and Presbyterian distinction — and it is a distinction, not a separation — between the visible and invisible church lies only in the utter impossibility of identifying the elect within the church. Thus the distinction permits us to understand that there are, within the organization of the church and attached physically to the promises pertaining to the church, some false pretenders.<sup>[45]</sup>

The *Scots Confession* of 1560 therefore with the rest of the Reformed and Presbyterian churches, scripturally declared, “As we believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, so we firmly believe that from the beginning there has been, now is, and to the end of the world shall be, one Kirk, that is to say, one company and multitude of men chosen by God, who rightly worship and embrace him by true faith in Christ Jesus, who is the only Head of the Kirk, even as it is the body and spouse of Christ Jesus.”<sup>[46]</sup> Clearly the foundational idea and importance of the church, then, has always been for the Reformed and Presbyterian theology the fact that the church finds its origin in the

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45. Richard Kyle “The Concept of Predestination in the Thought of John Knox” in *Westminster Theological Journal* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary), 46:1 Spring 1984, 64-65.

46. *The Scots Confession*, Chapter XVI, cited in David W. Hall and Joseph H. Hall, eds. *Paradigms in Polity: Classic Readings in Reformed and Presbyterian Church Government* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 227.

eternal predestinating plan of God. There is, for Reformed theology, “one company and multitude of men chosen by God” as the *Scots Confession* rightly says.

But this elect company of men on earth does not consist merely of disembodied spirits. The visible church, as it is called, consists of those people who give the *outward appearance* of being those elect who form the constituency of the church which is surely invisible to us, but quite visible to God. The “visible church” is therefore every bit as much dependant upon and arising out of the eternal purpose of God as is the “invisible church.” In fact, it may rightly be said that the visible church has no separate existence apart from the eternal plan of God and derives its importance as a divine institution from the fact that it is the *manifestation* of the people of God. This relationship was seen properly by Professor Robinson in his statement “It is set forth as a distinguishing feature of the purpose of redemption, that it is to save not merely myriads of men as *individual men*, but myriads of sinners, as composing a Mediatorial body, of which the Mediator shall be the head; a Mediatorial Kingdom, whose government shall be upon his shoulder forever; a church, the Lamb’s bride, of which He shall be the Husband; a bride whose beautiful portrait was graven upon the palms of his hands, and whose walls were continually before him, when in the counsels of eternity he undertook her redemption.”<sup>{47}</sup>

Robinson did not confuse two separate churches when he referred to the body of Christ and the Mediatorial Kingdom. Rather he posited the correct biblical doctrine that the outward and visible respecting the

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47. Robinson, *op. cit.*, 38-39.

church has its source — its origin and importance — in the internal and invisible.

James Bannerman, the Free Church of Scotland author of the two volume opus *The Church of Christ*, made a similar assertion when he wrote “We may assert, therefore, that the Christian society which we call the church of Christ is a society formed by Divine appointment, even did we see in it nothing more than a body of men brought together by the constraint of the same faith and same affections wrought in them by the Spirit of God.... [The believer] is not left at liberty to hide that faith within his own heart, and himself to remain alone and separated from his fellow believers. It is the office of the Christian society to be a witness, *by means of an outward and public profession*, for Christ on earth....”<sup>[48]</sup> Bannerman, though he did rightly distinguish between the visible and invisible, did not make a full bifurcation, for he stated that the purpose of the visible church was to give an outward manifestation and expression of the true faith of believers.<sup>[49]</sup> We will examine below the fact that there are false professors who attach themselves to the true church of Christ. Therefore just as we cannot make an *absolute separation* between the visible and the invisible, neither may we assert an *absolute identity* between the two. Yet for the purpose of understanding the importance of our study of the doctrine of the church, we must see that the out-

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48. James Bannerman *The Church of Christ* 2 Volumes (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991 reprint of 1869), 19-20.

49. Bannerman’s inconsistent adoption of the visible/invisible distinction first one way and then another will be examined below.

ward witness and manifestation of the church of Christ is as much of Divine origin and institution as is the election of God.

Those who would depreciate the importance of the Christian society the church by withdrawing or separating themselves for trivial reasons or by not *seeking out* the church in times when it is less visible do not thereby emphasize being a member of the invisible church. The church cannot be loved as it is in union with Christ but despised as it is a witness to him. A person cannot properly claim to be a recipient of Christ's grace while simultaneously neglecting the means of grace that Christ has placed within his church. It is contrary to all reason for someone to claim to love election, while at the same time ignoring or contemning the society and ministry by which the elect are called out of the kingdom of darkness. Simply put, we cannot rightly claim that we love the kingdom if we turn our backs upon its citizens and institutions. Quoting again from Bannerman's monumental work on the church, "That community is one, therefore, of Divine institution; and in the duty laid upon them [sic], not as a matter of choice, but of express command, to become members of it, we see the ordinance of God for the existence and permanent establishment of a church on earth. A solitary Christian is seen to be a contradiction in terms, if you view merely his faith as a principle of affinity naturally destined to draw to it the faith of other believers. A solitary believer is worse than a contradiction, he is an anomaly, standing out against the express institution of God, which has appointed the fellowship of believers in one church, and made provision in its outward ordinances for their union and edification."<sup>{50}</sup>

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50. *Ibid.*, 20-21.

As was discussed in the previous chapter, if the church is a Divine institution as Ezekiel’s temple certainly seems to indicate, then just as there were particular and Divine measurements for the ideal temple, so also there are Divine and particular rules and biblical commandments for the church today. It is important, therefore, for Christians to learn those biblical commandments and obey them — because God has instituted them for his glory and for our comfort and edification. Even as Thomas Witherow claimed in his *Form of the Christian Temple*, we must agree: “The church...is therefore a divine institution, not a voluntary society, in the sense of a human construction, whose principles and methods and objects men prescribe and alter at their pleasure; and not a creature of the state, for those who aided at its birth acted without the leave of Herod, or Pontius Pilate, or Tiberius Caesar. The church is a divine institution, deriving its existence from the will and authority of God, and formed by the Christians of a locality associating and acting together. Under these circumstances it is the duty of every Christian to seek admission to the fellowship of the church”<sup>{51}</sup>

### ***The Divine Plan Of Salvation***

Each of the reasons given for the importance of the study of the doctrine of the church up to and including this present section is, in a sense, a further narrowing of our reasoning from the general toward the particular. Thus finally at the core of our reasons we find the fact that the doctrine of the church is not *only* an object of faith; the church is not *merely* a Divine institution; it is the result and goal of the Divine plan of salvation and the dearly beloved bride for whom Christ died.

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51. Witherow, *Temple*, 59.

Understandably, some who are used to making a distinction between the visible church and the invisible church in a way that leads to a theological dichotomy will object at this point. We must remind one who would make such an objection that the visible church, rightly understood, is not a church separate from and independent of the invisible church, but is its outward manifestation and the administration in this present world *for the benefit of* the elect. It is precisely as God's good intentions for his elect are actualized that the church in this world becomes increasingly visible.

As the Westminster Confession of Faith biblically teaches in chapter 25 "Of The Church," there is no *ordinary* possibility of salvation outside the visible church, just as there is *absolutely* no possibility of salvation outside the invisible church. The Confession continues on to explain that the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God were given to the visible church for the purpose of gathering the elect:

"Unto this catholick visible church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God, for the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this life, to the end of the world; and doth by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto."<sup>{52}</sup>

Notably, the visible church, according to this Reformed and Presbyterian document, is not a *result* of the ministry or *built upon* ordinances. Rather, God has given his ministry and oracles and ordinances God *unto* the visible church in its worldwide manifestation. This idea

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52. WCF XXV.5, *Confession*, 108.

is further confirmed in the Westminster *Form of Presbyterial Church-Government*, where the Westminster Divines wrote, “The ministry, oracles, and ordinances of the New Testament, are given by Jesus Christ to the general church visible, for the gathering and perfecting of *it in this life*, until his second coming.”<sup>53</sup> The *Confession of Faith* claims that the ministry, oracles, and ordinances are for the purpose of gathering and perfecting *the saints*. In the *Form of Church-Government* the same items are presented to us as having their purpose in the gathering and perfecting of the visible church itself.

The outcome of this consideration should be an awareness of the importance of the visible ministry and ordinances of God as established in the visible church as they are his instruments for perpetuating not only the visible church considered as visible, but for perpetuating the visible church as it is the means of gathering and perfecting the elect of God — the bride of the Lamb.

The Reverend Stuart Robinson, Professor of Church Government and Pastoral Theology in the Theological Seminary at Danville, Kentucky in the nineteenth century summarized this teaching by distinguishing between what he termed the *ideal* and the *actual* and then pleading for a right understanding of the relationship between the two. Robinson began by pointing out:

“As the general ideal purpose of God becomes actual and revealed in time, so every part of the purpose has its corresponding actual external manifestation. The Mediator of the ideal eternal covenant becomes the Jehovah, in

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53. *Ibid.*, 397. Emphasis added.



various forms manifesting himself to men; the Angel of the covenant, not only the ideal covenant of Redemption, but of the actual covenant of grace, in its successive renewals and various forms; the King of Zion; the Word, speaking at sundry times and diverse manners to the fathers, and in the last time becoming incarnate to finish the atonement for sin; the ascended Son of Man, that hath the seven Spirits of God, to send forth the Holy Spirit, as his Vicar, to carry on the work of redemption on earth till he shall return a second time.”<sup>[54]</sup>

This relationship of ideal to actual (since ideas are real, perhaps a better term than “actual” would be “historical”), invisible to visible, and internal or mystical to external led Thomas Peck to four implications. First, that there is a two-fold *calling* — the one an external calling and that by the Word of God alone (as Matthew 20:16); the other an internal calling by means of the Spirit and the Word (Romans 8:30). Second, that there is also a two-fold *faith* that answers the callings. There is a common, historical, or temporary faith that may be found even in reprobates which assents to the truth of the gospel and which brings with it a transient joy (as Acts 8:13; Matthew 13:20; Mark 6:20; Hebrews 6:4; etc.); the other is a saving or justifying faith, “the faith of God’s elect” (Titus 1:1), or “faith unfeigned” (First Timothy 1:5), or “faith working by love” (Galatians 5:5).<sup>[55]</sup> Third, that

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54. Robinson, *op.cit.*, 40-41.

55. See the discussion in chapter five below on the subject of justifying faith versus temporary and historical faith.

there is a two-fold *holiness* corresponding to the external and internal calls. The one is relative, external, and federal only, consisting in the segregation from the communion of impure and profane men of the world (Ezra 9:2). Israelites were in this sense referred to in the Scriptures as “the holy seed,” etc. (Romans 11:16). This same holiness is recognized in both the Old Testament and the New Testament (as at First Corinthians 6:1-2; 7:14; etc.). The other holiness — that which corresponds to the internal calling — is absolute, internal, and real. It is the property only of the regenerate — a conformity to the image of God and *his* holiness — it is the holiness without which no man shall see the Lord (Psalm 93:5; First Peter 1:15-16; Hebrews 12:10, 14). Fourth and finally, there is a two-fold *communion in the covenant*. One is external in the signs of the covenant that belong to all those who are attached to the covenant by blood or affinity — all those who make a credible profession of *the faith*, though it may not be in reality *their faith* (Genesis 17:7, 10, 14; Acts 2:39; John 15:2, 6). The other is an internal and spiritual communion in the *very things* that are signified in the outward ordinances and sacraments such as remission of sins, the law written on the heart, etc. (Hebrews 8:10-12).<sup>[56]</sup>

So, then, whether we make the distinction between visible and invisible, historical and ideal, or external and internal, it is only in the sense in which the former participates as an outworking and manifestation of the latter that we grant it the name of “church.” It also follows from this consideration of the visible as the outworking of the invisible that the visible church also has its source and importance in

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56. Peck, *op. cit.*, 16-17.

the eternal decree of God unto the salvation of his elect. Professor Robinson continued in his work on the church and redemption:

“So in like manner the ideal *ekletoi* [chosen ones] of the covenant of redemption become the actual *kletoi* [called ones] of the manifested purpose in time. Inasmuch as they are called by an external *klesis* [call] of the word, they are gathered in successive generations to constitute the external *ekklesia* [assembly] on earth. In as far as they are called also by the internal *klesis* of the Spirit, they are gathered to constitute the invisible *ekklesia*, the full and complete actual of the eternal ideal.... And it is in this visible body that the Mediator carries on his administration, works by his Spirit, gives laws and ordinances for the present and exceeding great and precious promises of that which is to come; and through this body carries on his purposes of mercy toward a world lying in wickedness.”<sup>{57}</sup>

The church considered as the bride of Christ, then, must be regarded as the object of his eternal love and care (Acts 20:28; Ephesians 5:25; etc.). But as that bride is manifested in time and on the earth, men only see it in its *external* manifestation. God has decreed the external manifestation of the bride of the Lamb to be the instrument by which he reveals his will to men as well as the means by which he gathers the elect to himself. The visible church bears the same relationship to the eternal decree of God, then, that the net bears

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57. Robinson, *op. cit.*, 41-42. Translation added.

to the fisherman (Matthew 13:47-50). Once again, we can do no better than to quote Professor Robinson on this subject:

“From what will be shown hereafter, it will appear that the visible Church is an important, if not a necessary, means of revealing the whole counsel of God; and that, for aught we know, such is the constitution of the human mind that by no other method could have been communicated to human intelligence that peculiar feature of the purpose of God which contemplates the redeemed not as individuals merely, but as the mediatorial body of the Redeemer. It will appear, also, that, in another view, the Church is an indispensable means of accomplishing the great purpose of his love to his chosen people, as an institute for the calling, training, and edifying the elect. What is intended in the foregoing view is to exhibit the external Church in time as, primarily in the logical order of thought, the development of the ideal body of the covenant of redemption. Contemplated as a part of the process of manifesting to men the purpose of God to gather an elect people, the Church is a means through which God makes known his counsel. Contemplated as to its immediate end, the Church is a divinely-appointed institute, by which and through which to accomplish his purpose in the calling and edification of his elect. But both these views, however important and essential, are, logically speaking, secondary and incidental to the idea of the Church actual on earth *as the development* of the Church ideal, — ‘the pattern in the heavens.’”<sup>[58]</sup>

Thus the nineteenth century Presbyterian Professor, Thomas Peck, also considered that "...the church is the great and last result contemplated by the revelation concerning God, man, and salvation. It is the highest end, next to the glory of God, of all the counsels and all the works of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son, sanctified by the Spirit, and finally presented a glorious church without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, the Bride, the Lamb's wife, shall be hailed by principalities and powers in heavenly places, as the highest and noblest display of the manifold wisdom of God, Ephesians 3:9, 10."<sup>(59)</sup>

This idea or notion of the ideal church as it has always existed in the mind of God being manifested outwardly in time is reminiscent also of not only Hebrews 12:22ff., but Revelation chapter twenty-one as well. In the twenty-first chapter of the Revelation, John reports, "I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with man, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.... And he carried me away in the spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me that great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God.... And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it" (Revelation 21:2-3, 10, 22).

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58. *Ibid.*, 42-43. Emphasis added.

59. Peck, *op. cit.*, 8.

The holy city is, as Robert H. Mounce has well pointed out, of heavenly origin. The heart of the revelation of the new Jerusalem is that it is a community of redeemed men. The church as it is ideal is a community with the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb at its center. So too as it works itself out — manifests itself or is manifested — in time and on earth the church is a community that comprises the communion of the saints with God. The city of God is *apo tou theou* (from God) and *ek tou ouranou* (out of heaven). As Mounce demonstrated in his *The Book of Revelation* in the series *New International Commentary on the New Testament*, “...the church is not a voluntary organization created by man but a fellowship initiated and given by God.”<sup>{60}</sup>

Further, the expression of descent that John uses both in verse 3 and again in verse 10 indicates more than the simple fact that history will come to a close and an eternal state will ensue.<sup>{61}</sup> Rather, the idea is that what once existed only as an ideal with God is becoming actual in history. Verse 22 clarifies this for us because at the very point that we would anticipate for John to describe something similar to Ezekiel’s temple, he instead tells us plainly, “I saw no temple therein.”

For John, the reason there is no temple in the city is that the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem *from God to earth* indicates the historical manifestation of the ideal. The heavenly ideal of God’s presence with man is now seen in God’s historical presence with man in

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60. Robert H. Mounce *The Book of Revelation* in *New International Commentary on the New Testament*, F. F. Bruce, ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977, 1980), 370-71.

61. Thus Mounce, *Ibid.*, 378.

the church. This dissertation readily grants that the final state toward which everything is moving is that state of *eternal* blessedness, holiness, and worship when the redeemed shall “ever be with the Lord.” We should nevertheless note that it is a movement from and toward — a movement from heaven and toward earth; from God and toward men. The holy city is in descent in John’s vision. This new city, in the words of Professor Richard Jeske of Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, “is not a remote oasis beyond the clouds, but it comes down from heaven to the world of human beings.... The new Jerusalem is the manifestation of ‘God with us’ as expressed in the covenant promise.... [In] all that is done in the city, in all its daily activity, what remains visible is the source of its life, God and the Lamb. The new city reflects the center of its being, God and the victorious Christ who was crucified, for all things now are new.”<sup>{62}</sup> D. S. Russell is of the opinion that the vision of John, because it is not unique in apocalyptic literature, must be interpreted in light of the other apocalyptic literature. Even though Russell wrongly regards the vision to have to do with the end of time, yet he admits, “Behind this picture of re-creation and redemption, then, is the strong conviction that God’s *purpose*, which embraces the life of the whole created universe, will at last reach its glorious fulfillment. The powers of wickedness will be routed and creation itself will share in the salvation of God.”<sup>{63}</sup>

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62. Richard L. Jeske *Revelation For Today: Images of Hope* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 117-19.

63. D. S. Russell *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1964, 1971), 284.

The heavenly Jerusalem of John’s vision symbolizes the transcendent becoming immanent; the heavenly becoming earthly; the spiritual becoming flesh; the ideal becoming actual. As William Hendriksen pointed out over a half century ago, “The city here described belongs to the realm of heaven: the city is constantly coming down out of heaven.”<sup>{64}</sup> Because the city is from God, because it is continually and progressively coming down out of heaven; because it contains within its walls the pattern from heaven, it behooves us to study its walls and to “go round about her: tell the towers thereof. Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces; that ye may tell it to the generation following. For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide unto death” (Psalm 48:12-14).

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64. William Hendriksen *More Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1939, 1967), 243.



### 3. BIBLICAL TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

#### *TERMINOLOGY*

##### *Origin of the English Word “Church”*

The Bible was not written in English, but was translated out of Hebrew and Greek.<sup>[65]</sup> Nevertheless, because we deal regularly with an English language Bible that utilizes the word “church” quite often, it may be useful for us to examine first of all how we came upon the English term that refers to the object of our study. The English word “church,” the German “*kirche*,” Saxon “*circe*,” and the Scottish “*kirk*” are all derived from the Greek adjective *kuriakos* “belonging to the Lord” or the noun *kuriakon* meaning “that which belongs to the Lord.”

This origin is more or less confirmed by the fact that cognate terms are found not only in the western or Germanic dialects and languages (Swedish *kyrka*, Danish *kirke*, etc.), but also in the eastern or Slovakian nations that were converted under the Greek influence (Polish *cerkiew*, Russian *cherkov*, Bohemian *cyrkew*).<sup>[66]</sup> For a close examination of the biblical ideas behind the English term “church” it will be necessary to examine not the English word, but the word or words in the source languages from which the English Bible has been

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65. Certain portions of the Old Testament were actually written in the Aramaic (or Chaldee) language — a sister tongue to Hebrew.

66. Peck, *op. cit.*, 10-11.

translated. In doing so, we shall learn that the key idea behind the term(s) is that of an appointed assembly.

## ***THE HEBREW WORDS***

### ***Qahal***

The Hebrew word “*qahal*” carries with it the basic definition of “congregation” or “assembly.” The Authorized Version (KJV) also translates the word as “multitude” and “company” depending upon the context. These translations of the word as “multitude” and “company” are used specifically in the context in which *El Shaddai* (God Almighty) promised Abraham that he would be the channel of God’s blessing to the nations and again when God promised Abraham that he would be father of a multitude of nations. Particularly, in Genesis 28:3, Isaac blessed Jacob such, “and God Almighty bless thee, and make thee fruitful and multiply thee, that thou mayest be a *multitude* of people” (literally, “an assembly of peoples”). So too, when God changed Jacob’s name to Israel, the Lord said to him, “I am God Almighty (*El Shaddai*): be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a *company of nations* shall be of thee...” (Genesis 35:11, literally “an assembly of nations”).<sup>{67}</sup>

Through most of the Old Testament, the Hebrew term “*qahal*” is translated as “assembly” or “congregation,” especially as the people of God in the Old Testament are called either *qahal yisrael*, congrega-

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67. William Gesenius *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon*, tr. Samuel Tregelles (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979, 1986 reprint of 1847), 726.

tion of Israel, *qahal YHWH*, congregation of the Lord, or *qahal ha'elohim*, the congregation of God. The root idea of the noun *qahal* seems to be that of a *called* assembly. Thus the deponent verb *hiqhil* means “to call together or assemble a congregation,” as at the purification and consecration of the Levites in Numbers 8:9, “*w<sup>e</sup>hiqhalta 'eth-kol-<sup>l</sup>dath b<sup>e</sup>nei yisrael*” (“call together the whole congregation of the children of Israel”). Significantly perhaps, the deponent verb *hiqhil* is in Numbers 8:9 used with a different non-cognate term for the assembly or congregation (which term this dissertation will examine in the next section below as well as a discussion of Numbers 16:3ff. in this section).

This same deponent verb is used at Numbers 10:7, where the two silver trumpets were used to gather the congregation for travel and again at Numbers 20:8-11 where the people were gathered or called together in order to drink water from the rock. Another usage of the word appears in Job 11:10 where the context is that of God gathering people together — seemingly for judgment. Of the 162 occurrences of the noun and verb lemma in the Old Testament, the overwhelming number should be translated either as “assemble,” i.e., “call together for the purpose of forming an assembly,” or as a noun it should generally be translated simply as “assembly.”

The Greek Old Testament, usually called “Septuagint” and abbreviated as LXX, often translates the Hebrew noun *qahal* with the Greek terms *ekklesia* and *sunagoge* — the very words used in the Greek New Testament for the church. Though the division is not absolute, the tendency is for the LXX to translate *qahal* as *sunagoge* in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), and as *ekklesia* elsewhere.<sup>(68)</sup> Of the thirty-six times (possibly thirty-seven) that the LXX translates *qahal*

as *sunagoge*, twenty-four (two-thirds) are in the Pentateuch. At the same time the LXX *never* translates *qahal* as *ekklesia* within the Pentateuch.

The Old Testament uses the Hebrew word “*qahal*” to refer to the assembly of the covenant people, in whole or in part, for worship services, for their instructions in the ways of the Lord, for their purpose of getting a drink of water, for their assembling to travel together, and even for their assembling for the purpose of rebelling against the Lord. The most significant assembly in the entirety of the Old Testament was the day of the assembly or *yom haqqahal* in Deuteronomy 9:10. “And the LORD delivered unto me two tables of stone written with the finger of God; and on them was written according to all the words, which the LORD spake with you in the mount out of the midst of the fire in *the day of the assembly*.” Likewise in the subsequent chapter (Deuteronomy 10:4), when the same assembly at the foot of Mount Sinai is mentioned, Scripture again refers to *yom haqqahal* or “the day of the assembly.” Finally, in Deuteronomy 18:16 the meeting of Israel with God at Horeb was again known as “the day of the assembly,” or *yom haqqahal*.

The term “*qahal*” does not *always* refer to the entirety of the congregation, however. The Hebrew term is translated as “the assembly” in Leviticus 4:13. There, however, the *qahal* is distinguished or differentiated from the *`edah*, translated in that place as “congregation.” The *whole* congregation of Israel is viewed in that verse as sinning and the sin in turn being hidden from the eyes of the assembly. We

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68. George V. Wigram *The New Englishman’s Hebrew Concordance*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, c. 1984), 1094-95.

must therefore understand the assembly in that context to have primary reference to an assembly charged with the *oversight* of “the whole congregation.” This idea will become important in our understanding of the organization of the Christian church as a spiritual republic — especially in light of Matthew 18:15-20 — for the term “assembly” *can* and sometimes *does* refer not to the congregation at large, but to the congregation as represented by its duly ordained spiritual leadership.<sup>(69)</sup>

The same Hebrew word, “*qahal*,” can sometimes refer to the entirety of the “visible church” as well. In Nehemiah 13:1, the people read Deuteronomy chapter twenty-three (or so it would seem from the context). There they learned that Ammonites and Moabites should not come into the congregation of God forever (in Deuteronomy, however, the phrase is “congregation of the LORD”). We do not understand the ensuing separation in Nehemiah 13:3 to have reference to the national and physical presence of the Moabites and Ammonites. They were not cast from their homes and sent packing to other nations and localities. Rather this exercise in Nehemiah has typical and symbolic import for the whole covenant community of God.<sup>(70)</sup> Just as the Ammonite and Moabite were cast out of the visible church for their wicked acts (specifically in not bringing food and water to Israel when they had the opportunity in God’s providence to do so), so too are the openly and visibly wicked to be cast out of the visible church in this our own day. This relationship will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters on Presbyterian Minimalism and in later volumes

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69. See Chapter six below.

70. See Keil & Delitzsch, *op. cit.*, on Deuteronomy 23:1-8 in I.iii.413.

on the marks of the true church and the duties of the church. For now, however, we simply inquire into the various *usages* of Hebrew and Greek terminology for the church and find that one such usage is the eldership of the visible church. We shall revisit this idea of church discipline below.

A similar usage — that of assembling — can be found in Exodus 12:6. There “the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel” receives instruction to slay the Passover lamb. The Hebrew usage at this place, *kol q<sup>e</sup>hal `dath-yisrael*, may on first impression seem to refer to every Israelite in an indiscriminate way. We can dispel that wrong idea, however, by referring to the subsequent implementation of the command. At Exodus 12:21 we learn, “Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel and said unto them, Draw out and take you a lamb according to your families, and kill the Passover.” From this clarification we understand that the slaying of the Passover lamb was not in that Egyptian Passover something done individualistically or randomly. Rather, it fell to the elders of the visible church to oversee and explain the activity. This was a cultic activity and we therefore should understand these particular elders to have an ecclesiastical office, whether or not the differentiation existed at that point between civil and ecclesiastical elders. That is to say, there was not yet a nation *as such* with civil elders. There were apparently ecclesiastical elders and civil elders within Israel from very early days and, while the nation and church were coextensive during the age of the Mosaic institutions, they were not identical. Ecclesiastical office does seem to have been differentiated from civil office in Israel of old.<sup>(71)</sup> George

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71. See the next chapter, Chapter four.

Gillespie claims, in his *Aaron's Rod Blossoming*, that while there is no such distinction as “sacred and secular” to be found in the Mosaic institutions, yet one can find a distinction between the government of the ecclesiastical functions in Israel and the civil functions in Israel.<sup>[72]</sup> Gillespie goes on to claim that his view of two distinct Sanhedrim, the civil and the ecclesiastical, was also held by such reformers as Zepperus, Junius, Piscator, Wolphius, Gerhard, Godwin, Bucer, Walaeus, Pelargus, Sopingius, the Dutch Annotations, Bertramus, Apollonii, Strigelius, and the professors of the theological academy at Groningen.<sup>[73]</sup> The arguments for a separate ecclesiastical and civil government appear in Chapter Four below.

Likewise in Judges chapter twenty, though that assembly seems more civil than ecclesiastical, “the assembly of the people of God” is the *result* of the gathering of the congregation. So in verse one, “and the congregation was gathered together” or *watiqqahel ha`edah*. But in verse two, *after the gathering together* of the congregation, that body is called “the assembly of the people of God” or *q`hal `am ha`elohim*. So it is to a people as assembled and visible to the human eye that the term “*qahal*” has primary reference. Before they were assembled — or even in their unassembled state, we might say — they were the *`edah*. But subsequent to their gathering together as a visible and corporate entity and as a result of it they became known as the *qahal*.

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72. George Gillespie, *Aaron's Rod Blossoming*, (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1985 reprint of 1646 edition), 4-5.

73. *Ibid.*

These Hebrew terms are used in a similar manner — yet not as *absolute* synonyms — by Korah and his co-conspirators in Numbers 16:3. In that place, Moses reported them as saying, “Ye take too much upon you, seeing all the *congregation* are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them: wherefore then lift ye up yourselves above the *congregation* of the LORD?” The first instance of the English word “congregation” in this verse is a translation of the Hebrew *`edah*. The second is a translation of the Hebrew *qahal YHWH*. Here Korah and his fellow rebels use the two terms in a *nearly* synonymous way.

Though the two terms are used nearly synonymously by Korah and his fellow conspirators, a distinction between the two words was maintained to exist by Keil and Delitzsch in their massive series of Old Testament commentaries. The distinction between the two words and yet the presence of both words in the same context is explained by them in a theological manner. “The distinction between *`edah* and *qahal* is the following: *`edah* signifies *conventus*, the congregation according to its natural organization; *qahal* signifies *convocatio*, the congregation according to its divine calling and theocratic purpose. The use of the two words in the same verse upsets the theory that *`edah YHWH* belongs to the style of the original work, and *qahal YHWH* to that of the Jehovist.”<sup>(74)</sup> What may be of further interest to our study of Hebrew terms is the significant fact that while the noun *`edah* is singular in number, the predicate adjective that “modifies” it is masculine plural. The *`edah* as it relates to the church should be

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74. Keil & Delitzsch, *op. cit.*, I.iii.106.



understood as a collective noun, therefore, *consisting* of many individuals but *considered* as a single unit.

The Hebrew term “*qahal YHWH*” appears also at Numbers 20:4. There the children of Israel were in something of a panic due to the death of Miriam and the lack of water. In verse one the entirety of the children of Israel were referred to as *kol-ha`edah* or “the whole congregation.” But at verse four the same group of people was called the assembly or the congregation of the Lord in the sense of ‘*eth-qahal YHWH*.’” Both terms seem here to have reference to the visible assembly and not merely to the faithful believers within the assembly, for the New Testament — especially the third chapter of Hebrews, but also the tenth of First Corinthians — seems clearly to regard this “church in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38) to contain a majority of unbelievers. In fact, Stephen’s phrase “the church in the wilderness” may have reference to more than simply this single incident, given the Hebrew name of the Book of Numbers is “In the Wilderness” or “*Bammidbar*.”

In Micah’s prophesy — at Micah 2:5 — the prophet refers to the congregation of the LORD, the visible church of Jehovah, in the same terms. The prophet’s words are filled with irony, according to John Calvin, as he called the Jews of that day “the assembly of the LORD” or *qahal YHWH*. Calvin insightfully pointed out the irony of Micah’s words as he commented that Micah “denies that they [the Jews of Micah’s day — REB] *rightly* retained this name, inasmuch as they had *deprived themselves* of this honour and dignity.”<sup>(75)</sup>

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75. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, volume III (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), emphasis added. XIV.iii.193.

Note here how great a calamity people should consider it to be if they are separated from the visible church. God threatens in verse five to do the very thing he told the leadership of the church (the eldership in Israel) to do, viz., to separate the wicked from the assembly or *q<sup>h</sup>al* of the LORD. The casting of the lot is reminiscent of the manner in which the people of God obtained their inheritance in the days when they first entered the promised land. The threat, then, to *take away* the casting of the lot for the wicked in the assembly of the LORD is the semantic equivalent of *excommunication*. God said that if the wicked (those who devise iniquity — verse one) were not properly punished by the authorities — or if it should be that it was the authorities themselves who devised iniquity — that He would providentially remove them from their inheritance in the assembly of the LORD such that they would no longer have His word to work shame in them (verse six).

So, too, in the visible church of this day it is important for sessions to protect the assemblies of the Lord in a way that requires them to cast out evil. Not only should church officers be vigilant in bringing proper admonitions and judgments against the ungodly in the visible church, it is even more important for them to be vigilant in watching for evil in their own lives. Perhaps one reason that there is such a dearth of preaching of the word of God in this century is that discipline has been lax and there has been little or no preaching or judgment with respect to the holiness of God’s house. It is only as holiness is proclaimed from the pulpits of the churches that God’s people can expect to find the word of God in order to shame them for their sins.

The phrase “the congregation of the LORD” or “the assembly of the LORD” is the Old Testament equivalent of “the church of the

LORD.” The LXX in fact translates the phrase “*qahal YHWH*” — at least outside the Pentateuch — by the Greek phrase “*ekklesia kuriou*,” or “church of the Lord.” Significantly also, the earliest prophesies of Abraham becoming the faith father of the church consisting of both Jews and Gentiles refer to that church using the Hebrew word “*qahal*.” Thus Genesis 28:3; 35:11; and 48:4 should all be read in light of their fulfillment. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs *according to the promise*” (Galatians 3:28-29).

### ***‘Edah and Mo`ed***

Two additional Hebrew words are routinely used for the idea of the church — the assembly or congregation of God’s people — in the Hebrew Old Testament. These two words, *‘edah* and *mo`ed*, are both related as cognates of the Hebrew verb *ya`ad*. The Hebrew *ya`ad* carries with it the denotation of “to define” or “to appoint.” Thus the word may be used to signify an appointed *place* (Jeremiah 47:7), an appointed *time* (Second Samuel 20:5), or even an appointed *punishment* (Micah 6:9).<sup>{76}</sup>

From the simple (*qal*) signification of “to appoint” comes the reciprocal or passive *niphal* meaning of “to meet together” or “to come together at an appointed time or place.” This relationship would be comparable to the relationship between the English words “appoint” and “appointment.” By way of application the Hebrew *shoresh* (root) can then be modified in the *hiphil binyan* to mean “to

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76. William Gesenius, *op.cit.*, 355.

appoint someone to appear” or “to summon authoritatively” (as in Job 9:19 or in Jeremiah 49:19 and 50:44).

The *shoresh* is also used to form the two nouns *mo`ed* and *`edah*. Both nouns are regularly translated in the Old Testament by the English word “congregation” (or so it is in the Authorized Version; some modern translations more consistently distinguish between the two words for the English reader). The first word, however, has a slightly different connotation than the second. Of the more than two hundred times that the Hebrew word *mo`ed* is used in the Old Testament, far and away the greatest number is in conjunction with the “tent of the congregation” (*ohel mo`ed*) within the tabernacle. The basic idea is that of a set time or appointed time, but by way of application it refers to the appointed feasts and worship of God and then to the assembly that comes together for the appointed feast(s), and finally by way of metonymy it refers to the place where the assembly is held.<sup>[77]</sup>

The Hebrew noun “*`edah*,” distinct from the term “*mo`ed*,” nevertheless conveys the idea of an appointed meeting or assembly. Though the word can be used for a swarm (Judges 14:8), a mob or crowd (Psalm 22:17), or a domestic meeting (Job 16:7), yet in the overwhelming number of instances the word has reference to the congregation of Israel (in its full form it is *`adath-yisrael*).<sup>[78]</sup> The word is occasionally translated as “company” or “assembly” or even “peo-

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77. *Ibid.*, 457.

78. *Ibid.*, 607-608.

ple,” but it is as the congregation — the church — of the LORD or of Israel that we find the term most often set forth in the Old Testament.

Throughout the Old Testament from the Exodus onward both *qahal* (considered in the previous section) and *`edah* refer to the community of Israel as a whole, to the meetings of Israel for worship, or to the transactions connected with the social and cultic life of the people. Further, when we reach the gospels we are confronted with the very terms in Greek that were used to translate the Hebrew Old Testament in the LXX.

Thus Jesus went through all Galilee teaching in the *synagogues* in Matthew 4:23. The hypocrites gathered in front of the *synagogues* (as places of meeting) in Matthew 6:2. Jesus taught in the *synagogues* yet again in Matthew 9:35. The disciples were warned about being delivered to the councils (*sunedrion*) and *synagogues* to be punished in Matthew 10:17. Jesus claimed in Matthew 16:18 that he would build his assembly or congregation (*ekklesia*) “upon this rock.” Disputes that cannot be resolved privately or within the confines of a few witnesses should be taken to the congregation or assembly (*ekklesia*) in Matthew 18:17.

So also in the Acts and the Epistles we find the same language and terms adopted wholesale in the New Testament that were already familiar from the LXX to the Greek speaking Jew or proselyte. Great fear came upon the congregation (*ekklesia*) in Acts 5:11. Stephen disputed with the libertine party in the synagogue in Acts 6:9 and referred to the congregation or the assembly (*ekklesia*) in the wilderness in Acts 7:38. There was a great persecution against the congregation (*ekklesia*) in Acts 8:1 and who were apparently meeting in the synagogues of the Jews in Acts 9:2. But all the assemblies or congre-

gations (*ekklesia*) had rest in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee by the time of Acts 9:31.

Similarly these same Greek translations were used in Romans 16:1-4 and Romans 16:23; First Corinthians 1:2; etc. As the Reverend Douglas Bannerman observed over a century ago in his Cunningham Lectures, “It is obvious that we cannot be in a position rightly to estimate the meaning of these words in the New Testament unless we know something of their previous history and use.”<sup>{79}</sup>

The congregation or assembly of Israel was in some places called “*sunagoge*” and in other places “*ekklesia*” in the LXX. According to Girdlestone’s *Old Testament Synonyms*, “Whilst *qahal* generally refers to the representative gathering, *edah* often signifies an informal massing of the people.”<sup>{80}</sup> On the other hand, Campeggio Vitranga distinguished the two words by claiming that the reason the Christians adopted the term “*ekklesia*” rather than the term “*synagoge*” in the New Testament (and even that is not true in all cases as we shall see) was not so much to distinguish themselves from the Jewish synagogue, but because the term “*ekklesia*,” like “*qahal*,” denotes “a number of people, joined together by laws and other bonds, although it may often happen that they are not assembled together, and that it is impossible that they should be so.”<sup>{81}</sup>

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79. Douglas Bannerman, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976 reprint of 1887), 89.

80. Robert Baker Girdlestone, *Old Testament Synonyms*, (Grand Rapids: Associated Publishers and Authors, Inc., n.d. reprint of 1897), 231. Transliteration modified for consistency with this dissertation.

### *Miqra'*

There is yet one more Hebrew term that we should explore in the context of this study of biblical terms. The Hebrew term “*miqra*” occurs over twenty times in the Hebrew Old Testament and all but three of them are in the Pentateuch, with seventeen of them being in the books of Leviticus and Numbers alone. Additionally, the term can be found in Exodus 12:16; Isaiah 1:13 and 4:5. In the last place listed, the term almost certainly has reference to an assembly that took place for the purpose of worshipping God. A similar term exists in Numbers 10:2 and though there is a word in Nehemiah 8:8 that is closely related (it shows up as being the same word in Wigram’s *Concordance*), the Authorized Version properly translates it there as “reading” rather than “convocation.” It is of some further interest to note that in all instances but a handful that the term is joined with the adjective “holy.” Thus the expression is normally not simply “convocation” but is more fully presented as a “holy convocation,” or *miqra’-qodesh*.

The word for convocation comes, as we might expect from the English translation, from the verb *qara'*, “to call or convoke.” Not only were the feast days of the annual Hebrew calendar regarded as holy convocations, so also was the weekly Sabbath regarded as a holy convocation or *miqra’-qodesh*. Given the context of Leviticus 23:3, it is difficult to agree with the interpretation of some that it refers *only* to holding worship services at home. Rather, the reason that the Sabbath in verse three is separated from the rest of the “feasts of Jehovah” beginning in verses four and following is that the people were not

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81. Campeggio Vitrina, *De Synagoga Vetere* (Franequerae, 1696), volume 1, p.

88. Cited and translated by D. Bannerman in *op. cit.*, 92.

required to go to the sanctuary in Jerusalem week by week. It is here, rather than post-exilic times as D. Bannerman and others have speculated, that we find the origins of synagogue worship.<sup>{82}</sup> Further, the term “dwellings” used in Leviticus 23:3 has reference not so much to houses as *seats* or even *habitations*. The Hebrew term “*moshab*” and the particular form of Leviticus 23:3, *moshbotheykhem*, can also be translated as “your cities” (as in Second Kings 2:19) or even as “your assemblies” (as at Psalm 1:1 and 107:32).<sup>{83}</sup>

Not only Nehemiah 8:8, but Isaiah 1:13 and 4:5 seem also to indicate that these holy convocations were indeed local assemblies of the people for the express purpose of public worship, including the reading (so the use in Nehemiah) and exposition of the law (*torah* and *chaph-torah*). Though Girdlestone suggested that the significance may simply have been that the days of holy convocation were intended to be kept free from secular work, the implication of being “called out” or “*qara’ min*” or “*ek kaleo*” is simply too strong to ignore.<sup>{84}</sup>

Girdlestone went on in that same place to point out that the term was generally translated by the LXX with the Greek phrase “*klete hagia*.”<sup>{85}</sup> Though it is true that the Greek adjective “*hagios*” might be here understood, as Girdlestone suggested, in a predicate manner

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82. Keil and Delitzsch, *op. cit.*, I.ii.438-39, n1.

83. Gesenius, *op. cit.*, 460.

84. Girdlestone, *op. cit.*, 233.

85. *Ibid.*



(“called to be holy”), the LXX appears to be using *kletos* in a substantive manner as a called assembly that has a holy purpose or a sanctified origin. Conybeare and Stock refer to this *sort* of LXX usage as “taking the predicative position in an attributive sense.”<sup>{86}</sup> We thus may understand the adjective “*kletos*” to be used here as a substantive for the Hebrew *miqra’* and the Greek adjective “*hagios*” to be attributive though it is in the predicative position. As Dana and Mantey have also pointed out regarding the Greek adjective, “An adjective is in the attributive relation when it ascribes a quality to the noun which it modifies;.... The article, however, does not determine the relation of the adjective to the noun. This is determined by the mode of description by which the adjective presents the noun — whether the adjective is incidental or principal in the statement.”<sup>{87}</sup> Therefore, although the adjective “*hagia*” appears in the predicative position (i.e. after the word it modifies and without an article) we are justified in translating the phrase “holy convocation” rather than “called to be holy” or “called to be saints” as at Romans 1:7 and First Corinthians 1:2.

Neither D. Bannerman nor Vitringa believed that the synagogue can be traced back any farther in time than Nehemiah chapter eight.<sup>{88}</sup> Bannerman proceeded to quote Marcus Dods’ *Presbyterianism Older Than Christianity* to the same end. However, we must respectfully

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86. F. C. Conybeare and St. George Stock, *Grammar of Septuagint Greek*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988 reprint of 1905), 62.

87. H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: The MacMillan Co., 1957), 118.

88. D. Bannerman, *op. cit.*, 123ff.

disagree at this point with the learned Reverends Bannerman and Dods. First, we can see something very like the synagogue in the meeting together of the people to hear the expositions and sermons of the prophets, both in the exile and even prior to the Babylonian captivity.

Ezekiel 8:1 may seem at first glance to have reference to Ezekiel's own house, until we remember the manner in which the term "house" is often used in Scripture in a technical or limited sense for a place of prayer and other worship. The temple itself was sometimes called a house, as Matthew 21:13, "*my house* shall be called a house of prayer" (cf. Isaiah 56:7) and John 2:16, "make not *my Father's house* an house of merchandise." The word was also used throughout the book of Acts and the Pauline Epistles to refer to places of worship — both private, as Cornelius' reference to the place he used for prayer in Acts 10:30 (see also Daniel 6:10 in this regard) — and public as in Acts 2:46; 5:42; 8:3; 20:20; Romans 16:5; First Corinthians 15:19; Colossians 4:15; Titus 1:11; and Philemon 2. It was as Ezekiel met together with the elders of Israel that he was taken in the spirit (i.e. "in the visions of God," as Ezekiel 40:2 — see above) to the then still-standing temple in Jerusalem.

Again in Ezekiel 14:1ff. "certain of the elders" came to Ezekiel and Ezekiel preached to them the word of the LORD. In that context the prophet spoke to the *house* of Israel (verses 4, 6, 7, 11, etc.). We should also remember as we consider this preaching in and to the *house* of Israel that the modern Hebrew term for the place — the synagogue — where the local assembly takes place is the *beth-knesset*, or *house of gathering*.

In Ezekiel 14:6-7 God began to speak against those who came to a prophet to *inquire* concerning Jehovah. But in the twentieth chapter of Ezekiel that very thing came to pass. “Certain of the elders of Israel came to *enquire* of the LORD...are ye come to *enquire* of me...I will not be *enquired of* by you” (Ezekiel 20:1-3). Here the Hebrew verb *darash* is used in a theological sense of seeking or consulting for the purpose of receiving an oracle from God.<sup>{89}</sup> Though Scripture does not specifically inform us that the meeting with Ezekiel took place on the Sabbath day, we should note that it was “the desecrations of the Sabbath” that formed the theme or subject of his sermon to the elders that day (see, for example, verses 12, 13, 16, 20, 21, and 24).<sup>{90}</sup>

In the context of the Sabbath desecrations, one of the accusations that Ezekiel made against the elders (or more accurately God himself made the accusation) was that the people had worshipped God in the

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89. Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, *op. cit.*, 209.

90. While we cannot be certain that either the sixth year, the six month and the fifth day of the month or the seventh year, the fifth month and the tenth day of the month fell on a Sabbath, it is interesting to note that if the meeting with the elders in Ezekiel chapter eight fell on a Sabbath day, then so also did the meeting in chapter twenty. Figuring with alternating months of twenty-nine days and thirty days, as would be reasonable based upon Israel’s lunar calendar, we would have a Sabbath on the following days, if year six of the captivity, the sixth month, contained thirty days (year.month.day): 6.6.5, 12, 19, 26; 6.7.3, 10, 17, 24; 6.8.2, 9, 16, 23, 30; 6.9.7, 14, 21, 28; 6.10.6, 13, 20, 27; 6.11.4, 11, 18, 25; 6.12.3, 10, 17, 24; 7.1.2, 9, 16, 23; 7.2.1, 8, 15, 22, 29; 7.3.6, 13, 20, 27; 7.4.5, 12, 19, 26; 7.5.3, 10, 17, 24. Therefore, if 6.6.5 was on a Sabbath, then so also was 7.5.10.

high places in a manner that was specifically restricted to the temple. This they did and God characterized it as “polluting the Sabbath.” Pollution took place in the high places Sabbath by Sabbath both as the *house* of Israel worshipped false gods (i.e. idols of their hearts — Ezekiel 14:4) and additionally as they worshipped the true and living God in ways that he had never appointed (Ezekiel 20:27-28 cp. Deuteronomy 12:5ff. and Deuteronomy 12:32) for use outside the temple.

There is yet another place in the book of Ezekiel that indicates *at least* the possibility of weekly Sabbath convocations during the exile. In Ezekiel 33:30-31 we read “Also, thou son of man, the children of thy people still are talking against thee by the walls and in the doors of *the houses*, and speak one to another, every one to his brother, saying, Come, I pray you, and hear what is the word that cometh forth from the LORD. And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee as my people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they shew much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness.” We should note at this passage not only the portion emphasized by underlining — *the houses* and not *their houses* — but also the fact that the people who came claimed that they were coming for the purpose of hearing a word from the LORD. Of course the fact that they came hypocritically does not change the fact of their *purported* reason for coming to the prophet Ezekiel. Further, once they came to Ezekiel, they sat before him in order to hear his preaching (*w<sup>e</sup>yoshbu l<sup>p</sup>phanekha `ammi w<sup>e</sup>shom`u ‘eth-d<sup>e</sup>barekha*). But this is exactly the activity that was taking place in Nehemiah chapter eight where D. Bannerman, Dods, Vitringa and others claim that it is possible to discern the synagogue worship. But if the *same elements* are present both in the Ezekiel passages as well as in Nehemiah, then it seems to this author somewhat more than a little

arbitrary to claim to have found the synagogue in one place and *not* in the other.

While the above considerations from Ezekiel certainly seem to move the synagogue — the place of weekly Sabbath convocations — back to the exile, a question remains whether we can with good cause link the meetings and enquiries of Ezekiel’s day with the holy convocation of Leviticus 23:3. There is yet another place in the Old Testament that may, upon proper consideration, move the weekly synagogue Sabbath convocation back to the time of the kings of Israel and Judah (see below in this section). But if the synagogue predates the exile, then there is really no reason to find the synagogue’s inauguration in the destruction of the temple as many commentators have done.<sup>{91}</sup>

Yet those very commentators and authors have simply “dismissed” the idea of an early synagogue rather than dealing with the passages of Scripture adduced thus far in this dissertation. The synagogue clearly and certainly existed by Christ’s day. Further, rather than regarding the synagogue as an illegitimate institution, Christ frequented the synagogue and even taught in the synagogues of Galilee. It was his *custom* to enter the synagogue Sabbath by Sabbath (Luke 4:16) and to teach in the synagogues “about all Galilee” (Matthew 4:23). But if the synagogues were nothing more than institutions developed by the wit and wisdom of men, then one could not endorse

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91. Not only is this the opinion of D. Bannerman, Dods, and Vitranga as already mentioned; so also is it the opinion of Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), I.431.

them any more than he could endorse the high places that were dedicated to Jehovah, but condemned by him (see again Ezekiel 20:26ff. and Deuteronomy 12:5ff.).

We might reason as follows: If Christ partook of the synagogue worship, then the synagogue worship was lawful (Hebrews 7:26; First Peter 2:22). But Christ partook of the synagogue worship (Luke 4:16; Matthew 4:23). Therefore the synagogue worship was lawful (*modus ponens*).<sup>[92]</sup> At the same time, however, we must reason from Deuteronomy 12 and similar passages thus: If an institution of God's worship is not commanded, then it is unlawful (Deuteronomy 12:5-6, 32; Ezekiel 20:28; Colossians 2:22-23; Matthew 15:6, 9).<sup>[93]</sup> But the synagogue is not unlawful (by double negation of our previous conclusion: q = not not q). Therefore the synagogue is a commanded institution (*modus tollens*).<sup>[94]</sup>

But if Leviticus 23:3 is *not* the command instituting the synagogue as the weekly *miqra'-qodesh*, then there is no such command.<sup>[95]</sup> This we prove reasoning *modus tollens* as above: If there is *no* Scriptural command instituting the Sabbath synagogue worship, then Leviticus 23:3 is not such a command. But Leviticus 23:3 *does* institute a weekly *miqra'-qodesh*. Therefore, there is a Scripture command instituting the Sabbath synagogue worship. We thus demon-

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92. I.e., following the prepositional form of "If 'p' then 'q.' But 'p.' Therefore 'q.'"

93. See also Westminster Confession of Faith XXI.5

94. I.e., following the prepositional form of "If 'p' then 'q.' But not 'q.' Therefore not 'p.'"

strate apagogically that if Leviticus 23:3 does not institute the synagogue (or if there is no *other* passage in holy writ that institutes it), then at least one of our presuppositions of a consistent Scripture and a sinless Christ must be a false presupposition. If valid deductions from our axioms result in contradictions, then our axioms must be false. But we do not accept the contradiction that the synagogue is both lawful and unlawful at the same time and in the same way. We maintain that the synagogue *must* have originated in “the pattern in the heavens” and was revealed through Moses in Leviticus 23:3.

The final passage we should adduce to bridge the gap between the exile and Leviticus 23:3 is Second Kings 4:18ff. The particular portion of the story of the Shunammite woman that interests us in the context of the weekly synagogue worship is found in verse 23, “And he [her husband] said, Wherefore wilt thou go to him [the prophet Elisha] to day? It is neither new moon, nor *Sabbath*. And she said, It shall be well.” It may be that at first glance this Scripture seems to tell us little or nothing about the Sabbath *miqra*’. After all, the husband of the Shunammite woman declared clearly, “it is neither new moon nor Sabbath.” But it is his *surprise* at her leaving that attracts our attention. Had she left on a new moon or a Sabbath, he would not have been surprised, it would seem. C. F. Keil correctly commented on this

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95. Of course it could be argued here that the very existence of the synagogue would “by divine example” be an argument for its legitimacy and an explicit or implicit command need not be found. That argument can have a probative or evidentiary value, but in the final analysis we must agree with those who point out that it is logically impossible to argue from “is” to “ought” (the “naturalistic fallacy”).

place, “From these words,...[some] have drawn the correct conclusion, that the pious in Israel were accustomed to meet together...for worship and edification, on those days which were *appointed* in the law (Lev. xxiii.3; Num. xxviii.11 sqq.) for the worship of God; and from this Hertz and Hengstenberg have still further inferred, that in the kingdom of the ten tribes not only were the Sabbath and new moons kept, as is evident from Amos viii.5 also, but the prophets supplied the pious in that kingdom with a substitute for the missing Levitical priesthood.”<sup>{96}</sup>

We cannot agree with the idea that the prophets supplied everything that the priesthood was intended to perform under that economy, if that is what Mr. Keil had in mind. Clearly had they attempted to provide sacrifice or burn incense or some such function peculiar to the Aaronic priesthood, God would have regarded them as “light fellows” such as the ones Jeroboam installed at Dan and Bethel (Second Chronicles 11:15; First Kings 12:31). Nevertheless, as the priests and Levites were ordained by God to know and to teach his law and to provide wisdom for the judges and the people alike, Keil has rightly understood the function of the prophet and the role he would have played in a kingdom deprived, according to Second Chronicles chapter eleven, of its Levites.

So then, in conclusion, we maintain that while it is difficult to trace the synagogue through every book and time of the Mosaic institutions, there is a train that extends from Leviticus through Nehemiah, which is to say from Moses’ generation through the generation in which the Old Testament canon came to a close. There was a *miqra’-*

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96. Keil and Delitzsch, *op. cit.*, III.i.311., n1.



*godesh* in the days of Moses, in the days of Elisha, in the days of Ezekiel, and in the days of Christ. That synagogue was an institution of God and will be investigated in somewhat greater detail in the following section in which we will consider some Greek terminology in the New Testament.

## ***THE GREEK WORDS***

### ***Sunagoge***

We have encountered the Greek word “*sunagoge*” in our previous section(s). We noted there that the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint or LXX, often translated key Hebrew terms for the church using the Greek word “*sunagoge*.” The Greek word comes from a root word that means “to gather together,” so that a synagogue comes to mean a gathering place by way of metonymy: the building in this case standing for its function.<sup>{97}</sup>

Thus Philo used the term as a reference to a sacred place where the Jews gathered on the Sabbath day. “Now these laws they are taught at other times, indeed, but most especially on the seventh day, for the seventh day is accounted sacred, on which they abstain from all other employments, and frequent the sacred places which are called synagogues, and there they sit according to their age in classes, the younger sitting under the elder, and listening with eager attention in becoming order.”<sup>{98}</sup>

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97. Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, *op. cit.*, 789-91.

Josephus used the term in an identical sense in his famous work, *The Wars of the Jews*, “Now on the next day, which was the seventh day of the week, when the Jews were crowding apace to their synagogue, a certain man of Caesarea, of a seditious temper, got an earthen vessel, and set it with the bottom upward, at the entrance of that synagogue, and sacrificed birds.”<sup>{99}</sup> Though early Jewish sources such as Philo and Josephus indicate an understanding of the synagogue as a meeting place, the LXX *never* uses the Greek term for an actual building.<sup>{100}</sup> By the time of the New Testament, however, the term was used regularly as a place for corporate prayer, reading of Scripture, preaching, and teaching.<sup>{101}</sup> Thus we find such language in the New Testament as “teaching in their synagogues” (Matthew 4:23; 9:35), “he entered into the synagogue” (Mark 1:21; 3:1), “he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day” (Luke 4:16), and “he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath” (Luke 13:10).

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98. C. D. Yonge, trans. *The Works of Philo* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 689-90.

99. William Whiston, trans. *The Works of Josephus* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 616 [standard Loeb notation II.14.289.]

100. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, Eds. *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), *in loco*. Hereafter *Kittel*.

101. Anthony J. Saldarini, “Synagogue,” in *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, Paul J. Achtemeier, ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1985), *in loco*.

The synagogue, as an institution, appears to have served a three-fold purpose of worship, education, and government. Whether the elders of the synagogue were ever permitted to exercise discipline and punish members in civil cases,<sup>{102}</sup> they certainly could hear ecclesiastical cases and inflict ecclesiastical censures. Based upon the record of the New Testament, it is the opinion of this author that the Jews were restricted, at least in the first century, to an *ecclesiastical* court in the synagogue, but with instituted punishments that seemingly went beyond the Christian church's present-day authority to administer. The Christian church has no authority to administer *corporal* punishments, but is limited according to biblical and Presbyterian understanding to *spiritual* censures. Thus the Westminster Confession correctly gives an exhaustive list of the church's remedies in chapter thirty: "For the better attaining of these ends, the officers of the church are to proceed by admonition, suspension from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper for a season, and by excommunication from the church, according to the nature of the crime, and demerit of the person. Yet, according to Matthew 10:17, the councils were permitted to *scourge* ecclesiastical offenders, and that seemingly in context of the synagogue. Luke 12:11 seems to distinguish between the synagogue on the one hand and the magistrate on the other, yet there is nothing in the immediate context that *rules out* the idea that the phrase "synagogues, magistrates, and powers" may not form a figure of speech known as

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102. Dr. Charles Feinberg is of this opinion in his article on the "Synagogue" in *The New Bible Dictionary* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1962), *in loco*. He bases his opinion primarily on the fact that punishment in the form of "scourging" was found in the synagogue.

“synonymy” in which all three terms have the same referent(s). It must be admitted that it is a possibility, contextually, however remote, that *sunagogas*, *archas*, and *eksousias* all have reference to the leadership and jurisdiction of the synagogue. Thus the distinct possibility exists that the synagogue was used not merely for ecclesiastical censures, but for civil censures as well.

In a similarly worded passage in Luke 21:12 the wording seems to refer simply to the various temporal enemies that may one day “lay hands” on Christians without particular reference to either the ecclesiastical or civil, but using terms that encompass both. Whether the synagogue therefore had authority to administer *all* corporal punishments, what is clear is that the synagogue could excommunicate wayward members and this excommunication may in fact have been regarded as the maximum punishment that the synagogue, as it was ecclesiastical, could rightly inflict upon its members. Thus the phrase to be “put out of the synagogue,” which appears in John’s gospel at 9:22; 12:42; and 16:2 carries the semantic force of “to be excommunicated.” This punishment would be the ecclesiastical equivalent of banishment in the civil realm, and clearly carries over to the Christian church.<sup>{103}</sup>

Not only did the synagogue have a system for dealing with wayward members and hence a government peculiar to it, it was also a place for the teaching God’s law as can be seen from the New Testament. We already examined such Old Testament passages as Nehemiah 8:8; Ezekiel 8:1; 14:1; 20:1; 33:31; and Second Kings 4:23 and saw the teaching function of the synagogue (or *at least* the proto-synagogue) in those passages. By the time of the New Testament, however, Christ and his disciples frequently taught in the synagogues

of the Jews. Of course it would be imprudent to suggest that the synagogue of the first century had the same *shule* that the medieval and modern synagogue enjoy. Yet we must also remember, as Alfred Ederheim reminded us, that to the first century Jew the knowledge of *torah* was everything. “In the days of Christ the pious Jew had no other knowledge, neither sought nor cared for any other — in fact denounced it — than that of the law of God.... To the pious Jew,...the knowledge of God was everything; and to prepare for or impart that knowledge was the sum total, the sole object of his education.”<sup>{104}</sup>

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103. First Thessalonians 5:12 “And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you;” Second Thessalonians 3:6 “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us.” Second Thessalonians 3:14-15 “And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” First Corinthians 5:4-5 “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” First Corinthians 5:13 “But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.” Matthew 18:17 “And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.” Titus 3:10 “A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject;” All quotations are from the Authorized Version of the Bible.

Much of what a Jewish youth needed to know in order to pursue and then carry out his calling he would have received by way of parental education and apprenticeship. But he would have learned *torah* primarily at the synagogue. Thus it was that Christ and those who followed him made attendance at the synagogue their *custom* (Luke 4:16). Jesus taught in the synagogues in Matthew 13:45; Mark 6:2 and places previously adduced. Also significant in this regard is Jesus' claim in John 18:20, "I spake openly to the world; I ever taught in the synagogue, and in the temple, with the Jews always resort; and in secret have I said nothing." If it is the case, as Edersheim and others have suggested, that there was a synagogue actually attached to the temple complex,<sup>105</sup> then it may also be that much of the teaching that took place "in the temple" was also synagogue teaching (Luke 2:46; Matthew 21:23ff; 23:38-24:2; John 7:14, 28; 8:2; 18:20; etc.). It was also the practice of Christ's preaching and teaching apostles to teach in the synagogues of the Jews (as Paul at Acts 13:5, 15, 44; 14:1; 17:2-4, 10, 17; 18:4, 26; 19:8).

Additionally, based upon the assumption that there was a synagogue within or attached to the temple, that would likely have been the *house* where the disciples were sitting in Acts 2:2 on the Day of Pentecost. As their preaching on that Pentecost became known, the multitude *came together* (*sunerchomai*) in a place sufficiently large

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104. Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life in the Days of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987 reprint of 1876 edition), 124.

105. *Ibid.*, 265-66.

for all to hear. Later, the disciples prayed in the place “where they were synagogued” in Acts 4:31. So also, if it is the case, as Edersheim further suggested, that the temple synagogue was located at the southeastern corner of the temple complex where Solomon’s Porch and the Royal Porch came together, then that possibly gives new significance to the fact that so much of Christ’s teaching took place “in Solomon’s Porch” (John 10:23) and the disciples “were all with one accord in Solomon’s Porch” (Acts 5:11-12).

The third function of the synagogue was as a place of prayer and other worship for God’s people. Thus Christ referred to even the hypocrites who came to the synagogue to worship in Matthew 6:5, “for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men.” This worship appears from Matthew 12:2 (comparing with verse 9) to be especially a part of Sabbath observances. See also Luke 4:15-16 in regard to attendance in the synagogues *on the Sabbath*. Preaching, or exhortation, was also seemingly a part of regular synagogue activity, for Christ not only *taught* in the synagogues; Mark’s gospel informs us pointedly, “he *preached* in their synagogues throughout all Galilee” (Mark 1:39).

The Jewish synagogue was, in conclusion, a place of study and teaching. It was, moreover, a place of covenantal or ecclesiastical government. And most of all, the synagogue was a place where God was worshipped *not* in the passing manner of the temple, but making use of the moral elements of worship that transcend the particulars of the Mosaic institutions. The Synagogue is a multifaceted institution, as Charles Lee Feinberg demonstrated nearly fifty years ago:

“The Jewish Synagogue is not only a house of prayer  
(*beth tefillah*), but a place of communal gathering (*beth*

*haknesseth*) and a place of study (*beth hamidrash*). The synagogue contains the ark, the scrolls of the law, the perpetual light, the candelabra, and the *bimah* or pulpit. The ark containing the scroll is built into the eastern wall toward Palestine. The main scrolls in the ark are of the Pentateuch, but there are smaller scrolls also containing the former and latter prophets. The perpetual light stands for the light that burned continually in the tabernacle and the temple. The *bimah* is the pulpit in front of the synagogue. The reading desk for the reading of the law is in the center of the sanctuary. Synagogues, in keeping with the Jewish interpretation of Exodus 20:4–6, have no paintings, statues, or carvings of any kind. Orthodox Jews forbid the use of an organ in the service, because rabbinical law set this prohibition as a token of mourning over the destruction of the Temple where the Levites played on musical instruments. All orthodox synagogues have a separate balcony or section for women. This had its origin in the Temple where there was a Court of Women. Each synagogue or temple has a rabbi who is the spiritual leader.”<sup>{106}</sup>

Jesus said that he would “gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other,” Matthew 24:31. The word, “gather,” is a Greek verb meaning, literally, “to synagogue,”

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106. Charles Lee Feinberg, “The Old Testament in Jewish Thought and Life,” in *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary) Volume 111, #442 (Apr-Jun 1954), 131-32.



i.e., to lead, gather, or bring together. The point Jesus was making is that with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Jesus would send out his messengers to gather his elect into his gospel synagogue, the church. Jesus was actually quoting from Moses, who promised, “If any of thine be driven out unto the outmost parts of heaven, from thence will the LORD thy God gather [*“synagogue”*] thee, and from thence will he fetch thee,” Deuteronomy 30:4 LXX. Jesus came, in fulfillment of prophecy to restore God’s house, the organized congregation of his covenant people. In the book of Hebrews, the author urges his readers not to forsake “the assembling [*“synagoguing”*] of themselves together,” Hebrews 10:25.

### *Ekklesia*

The *ekklesia* of the New Testament answers with greatest correspondence to the *qahal* of the Old Testament (see above in section on “The Hebrew Words”). In the same way that the word “*qahal*” has its origin in a verb that denotes an act of calling or designating, so the Greek word “*ekklesia*” has its origin in the Greek verb “*kaleo*” plus a prepositional prefix meaning “out of.” Thus it is that we may say that the *ekklesia* should be regarded as those who have been “called out of” the kingdom of darkness into God’s kingdom. Further, believers in Christ, as members of his church, have been called out of bondage — a bondage far worse than that of Egypt — a bondage to sin.

Earlier in this chapter we noted that the English word “church” likely has an etymology that links it to the Greek *kuriakos*. Yet it is the case that since the Authorized Version, most English translators have used the word “church” for the Greek word “*ekklesia*.” Tyndale previously had rightly translated the word into English variously as “con-

gregation” or “assembly,” thus maintaining more carefully the relationship between the Old Testament and New Testament that the use of the Greek word implies.

The Greek word “*ekklesia*” is biblically and theologically more important to the exegete or theologian than is the term “*sunagoge*.” On an examination of the gospels, however, we find the word used only twice and both those occurrences are in Matthew’s gospel — at Matthew 16:18 and again at Matthew 18:17. Though much has been made by some authors of the use of future tense in Matthew 16:18 (“will build”),<sup>{107}</sup> the contrast is not so stark as the dispensationalist wrongly understands it. The same author uses the same Greek word “*oikodomeo*” in Matthew 23:29 for building the tombs of the prophets. But the idea in Matthew 23:29 is not that they began to build the tombs for the first time. Rather, the idea is that they repaired them, perhaps even amplifying them, “adding on” as they went, and remodeled them. Thus the future indicative active of Matthew 16:18 need not mean “I will begin at some future date building my church for the very first time.” Given the use of such terms in the LXX as “*ekklesia tou kuriou*” and “*ekklesia tou theou*,” we should probably translate the phrase indicated by *oikodomeso* as “I will continue to upbuild, establish, repair, and even remodel” my church. In Acts 9:31 the participial form of the verb is used in exactly that sense. The churches of Judea were not then being established for the first time, but were being further edified.

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107. See, for example, W. E. Vine, “Assembly,” in *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1981), *in loco*. And articles in *Bibliotheca Sacra* too numerous to recount.

A dispensationalist understanding of *oikodomeso* might still plead that the examples we have given of the verb having a meaning of “build up, repair, remodel, or amplify” do not apply because the examples given do not appear in the future indicative active, as the verb does in Matthew 16:18. Of course, Christ’s similar usage in Mark 14:58 may be instructive here. There was both a newness and an oldness about his resurrection. The Jesus who rose from the dead was the *same* Jesus who was laid in the grave. He did not build a new body “from scratch,” as it were, but rather *rebuilt* the body that had been “destroyed” in death. So also, in using the future active indicative in Mark 14:58 he does not mean he will begin for the very first time to build himself a body.

Of course, Hebrews 10:5 indicates pretty clearly that Christ’s body was *first* prepared (perfected) when he came into the world. Christ’s body was prepared at the commencement of his incarnation and *not* for the first time at his resurrection. Thus, the Greek word is used in the future indicative active with the idea of rebuilding or remodeling something that has fallen into disrepair or that will fall into disrepair of some kind. There is no contextual reason in Matthew 16:18 to understand that the church of which Christ spoke would be inaugurated for the very first time on the day of Pentecost. Rather, the word can and most likely does refer to the embellishments the church would receive upon Christ’s resurrection of a greater simplicity and the adornment of holiness spoken of in Ezekiel. The Westminster Confession of Faith points to this rebuilding or remodeling when referring to the liberties that are present in this gospel age. “All which were common also to believer under the law; but under the new testament, the liberty of Christians is further enlarged in their freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, to which the Jewish Church was

subjected, and in greater boldness of access to the throne of grace, and in fuller communications of the free Spirit of God, than believers under the law did ordinarily partake of.”<sup>{108}</sup>

As discussed somewhat in an earlier section, the LXX uses the term *ekklesia* about one hundred times and most of the time it is to translate the Hebrew *qahal*. The term has a basic meaning of “assembly,” but the addition of *tou kuriou* gives the word a technical or theological usage (for example at Deuteronomy 23:2ff.). Other similar usages would be “assembly of Israel,” or “the whole congregation,” or “the assembly of the saints.” By the time one reaches the first century, there is a fairly well established usage of the Greek term that has arisen from the usage of the LXX. The New Testament, as *TDNT* points out, is given a specific impress by the Greek Old Testament.<sup>{109}</sup> Therefore, given the previous widespread usage of the word in the LXX as well as authors writing about the LXX, the history of the Jewish and Christian usage of the word (diachronic) is actually more important for our study than is etymology.<sup>{110}</sup> This fact becomes even more apparent when we consider that neither the verb “*ekkalein*” — to call out; nor the adjectival substantive “*ekkletos*” — a summoned one

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108. WCF XX.1, *Confession*, 85-86.

109. K. L. Schmidt, “*Ekklesia*,” in Gerhard Kittel and G. W. Bromily, eds. *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 3:487-536. Hereafter *TDNT*.

110. It is usually the case that etymology sheds less light on how a word is used than does the history of the usage plus the *usus loquendi*, extensive “word studies” such as Wuest, Robertson, and Vincent notwithstanding.

— occurs in the New Testament and that both words are also quite rarely used in the LXX as well. Schmidt went on in his article in *TDNT* to state that this previous Old Testament usage “explains why Latin [also] adopts *ecclesia* rather than such renderings as *curia*, *civitas Dei*, or *convocatio*. The term ‘*ekklesia*’ has a sacred history in the sacred writings. It stresses the distinctiveness of Christianity as compared to cultic societies, for which there are special terms like ‘*thiasos*.’ Hellenistic Jews are [sic] probably the first to apply the term to the church, preferring it to *sunagoge* because the latter was acquiring a more restricted sense, and perhaps because there is some similarity of sound between *ekklesia* and Heb. *Qahal*.”<sup>{111}</sup>

Not only the LXX, but Josephus as well, utilized the Greek term for assembly or congregation. Thus when describing how Joseph Hyrcanus made reconciliation between the people and Ptolemy Euergetes, Josephus explained, “...Joseph went up into the temple, and called the multitude together to a *congregation*, and exhorted them not to be disturbed nor affrighted, because of his uncle Onias’s carelessness, but desired them to be at rest, and not terrify themselves with fear about it; for he promised them that he would be their ambassador to the king, and persuade him that they had done no wrong;...”<sup>{112}</sup> This usage is reminiscent of Luke’s usage in Acts 19:39, where the whole phrase is translated “a lawful assembly.” A similar usage is found in Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews* at XIX (332), though it is not clear from Josephus’ recounting whether the assembly spoken of there was one law-

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111. *Ibid.*

112. Whiston, *op. cit.*, 318. [*Antiquities* XII.iv.2]

fully called or if it had more in common with Korah's assembly in Numbers chapter sixteen.

More significantly for the purposes of our study is Josephus' use of the Greek *ekklesia* in reference to the day of the assembly in Exodus 19ff. Speaking of the *yom haqqahal* (see above under "Hebrew Words"), Josephus reported, "On the next day, Moses called the people together, with the women and children, to a *congregation*, so as the very slaves were present also, that they might engage themselves to the observation of these laws by oath; and that, duly considering the meaning of God in them, they might not either for favor of their kindred, or out of fear of anyone or indeed any motive whatsoever, think anything ought to be preferred to these laws, and so might transgress them; that in case anyone of their own blood, or any city, should attempt to confound or dissolve their constitution of government, they should take vengeance upon them, both all in general, and each person in particular; and when they had conquered them, should overturn their city to the very foundations, and, if possible, should not leave the least footsteps of such madness: but that if they were not able to take such vengeance, they should still demonstrate that what was done was contrary to their wills. So the multitude *bound themselves by an oath* so to do."<sup>113</sup>

Clearly Josephus had an agenda, hidden or otherwise, in relating the lawful oath to keep God's laws and precepts to an unlawful oath to commit mayhem and riot if the laws were broken. But this understanding of the covenant, wrong though it is, may give us some insight into how the Jews of Josephus' time understood the purpose and exist-

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113. *Ibid.*, 124. [*Antiquities* IV.viii.45]

ence of the assembly in the wilderness (Acts 7:38). Strictly by the way, it may also provide some insight into the vow made by more than forty Jews against the life of Paul in Acts 23:12-14ff.

As Robert Reymond has well summarized, “It is clear then that the Old Testament background of the word ‘*ekklesia*’ is rich with theological meaning. It is the most vivid expression for the redeemed kingdom of God, depicting the sovereign God as One who dwells in the midst of his people and who summons them to assemble before him. Because he is among them they must meet with him. And the immediacy of his presence convokes the people and evokes their worship. His presence demands that the people of God stand before him, just as the people of an earthly king would be required to do.”<sup>{114}</sup>

Thus we learn from Professor Reymond that it is not so much the calling *out* that characterizes the church as the summoning (or calling out) of a people with the purpose of bringing them *together* to meet covenantally with God that forms the basis or theological underpinning for the Christian understanding of the *ekklesia* (see, for example, Exodus 5:1). As T. E. Peck well observed in his *Notes on Ecclesiology*, “The Greek *ekklesia* answers precisely to the *qahal* and *`edah* and *mo`ed* of the Old Testament, all these terms signifying an assembly, especially one convened by invitation or appointment.”<sup>{115}</sup> Hence

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114. Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 809-810. [Greek orthography not retained]

115. Peck, *op. cit.*, 11. Transliteration modified for consistency with this dissertation.

it is that we conclude that the church is indeed *called out of* the world of darkness, but also that it is *called into* the kingdom of light. The Scriptures throughout teach us that the church comes into being *not* by the wit and wisdom of men, but specifically by the *calling* of God by his Word (externally) and by his Spirit (internally).

Concerning the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt, the prophet Hosea maintained concerning God's church, "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and *called* my son out of Egypt" (Hosea 11:1). So too the prophet Isaiah used similar language when he declared, "O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have *called thee by name*; thou art mine" (Isaiah 43:1). So later in the passage Isaiah elucidated, "Fear not: for I am with thee:... bring my sons from far and my daughters from the ends of the earth; *Every one that is called* by my name" (verses 5-7). In the New Testament the divine calling (*klesis*) is also always associated with the church of the Lord. Romans 1:7 and First Corinthians 1:2 both speak of the church as "those who are *called* to be saints."

Most notably Paul draws the church of both Old Testament and New Testament together based upon the significance of the calling of God Almighty. In Romans 9:24-26, Paul wrote, "Even us, whom he hath *called*, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles. As he saith in Osee, I will *call them* my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved. And it shall come to pass that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people; there shall they be *called* the children of the living God." So it is that the *ekklesia* is composed of those who have heard the summons of God and have gathered together not so much to be with one another as to be with him who called them. "Awake thou that sleepest, and arise



from the dead” (Ephesians 5:14) and “the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God and they that hear shall live” (John 5:25). This calling also is in view in John 10:16 in which Christ stated, “they shall hear his voice; and there shall be one fold and one shepherd.” Herman Hoeksema concluded regarding the *ekklesia*, “It is therefore through the divine *calling* that the church is *gathered out* of the whole human race.”<sup>{116}</sup> The Reverend Professor Hoeksema continued, speaking of the divine calling, “It is the mighty Word of salvation whereby the church is called out of darkness into light, out of the natural fellowship of the sinful human race into the communion of saints, into the fellowship of his body. The Son of God by His Spirit and Word gathers His own church out of the whole human race.”<sup>{117}</sup>

We do not have the space presently to examine every occurrence of *ekklesia* found in the New Testament, but it will be instructive to consider two foundational passages. Because the word occurs but twice in the gospels, it would be good to learn from those two instances (both in the gospel of Matthew) the manner in which Jesus himself used the term — or at least how he used the Aramaic term that has been reported by an inspired evangelist utilizing the Greek *ekklesia*. Reymond opined that Jesus likely used the Aramaic *q’hala’* or a similar word, but would also have been conversant in Greek and may actually have used the Greek terminology in and near the coasts of Caesarea Philippi.<sup>{118}</sup> Reymond concluded several things about Jesus’

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116. Hoeksema, *op. cit.*, 587. Emphasis added.

117. *Ibid.*

118. Reymond, *op. cit.*, 822-23, n39. See also Matthew 16:13 for the location.

use of the terminology in Matthew 16:18 concerning his assembly, whether he spoke Greek *or* Aramaic on the occasion:

“First, the disciples did not appear to have any difficulty comprehending Jesus’ talk about building his *ekklesia*. This can be traced to the fact that the concept had its roots in the Septuagint’s recurring depiction of Israel as God’s ‘congregation’ or ‘assembly.’ Second, it is ultimately Jesus, not men, who ‘will build’ his church. Like a wise master builder who builds a house, so Jesus will build his church. Third, his ‘building,’ more specifically his ‘temple’ (Ephesians 2:20-21) will be unconquerable: the very gates of Hades (the power of death?) will not prevail against it. Fourth, Jesus would build it upon the ‘bedrock’ of his own person as the Messiah and divine Son of God as this ‘bedrock’ comes to expression in both his and his apostles’ authoritative teaching. Fifth, his *ekklesia*, made up of those who like Peter confess his messianic role and divine Sonship, would be ‘the assembly (or “congregation”) of the Messiah.’ Sixth, his *ekklesia* would become the vehicle of authority (see ‘the keys of the kingdom of heaven’) throughout this age for carrying out the predetermined will of heaven by ‘binding’ (that is, ‘retaining’) the non-elect man’s sins through the ‘smell of death’ character for him (Second Corinthians 2:16) of the gospel proclamation and/or of church discipline, and ‘loosing’ (that is, ‘forgiving’) the elect man’s sins through the ‘fragrance of life’ character for him (Second Corinthians 2:16) of the same gospel proclamation and/or of church discipline. These two activities on the church’s part

(‘binding’ and ‘loosing’ in accordance with the predetermining will of heaven) would become the means through the centuries by which Jesus would ‘build’ his ‘assembly.’ Seventh, Jesus’ statement suggests that his ‘assembly’ would be a *worldwide* entity, for this appears to be the connotation of the word here. Finally, the fact that the ‘foundation stones’ of his ‘assembly’ were given the keys of the *kingdom of heaven* indicates that there is a direct connection between church and kingdom. In other words, by entrusting oneself in saving faith to the Christ espoused in the apostles’ doctrine, one enters Messiah’s church, which is also the present redemptive expression of the kingdom of heaven among men. As Paul will write later: ‘[The Father] delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son of his love’ (Colossians 1:13).”<sup>{119}</sup>

A couple of notes may be in order regarding Professor Raymond’s excellent summary. First it does seem likely to this author that what is intended by Christ’s words, “the gates of Hell,” is in fact death or the grave. This could well be in the context of his own impending death given the fact that the opposition to his ministry had already begun to escalate (“who do *men* say that I am?). Further, however, it is significant that the church has outlived Peter on this present globe along with the Spirit of Christ. The church has not come to an end with the death of Peter or even with the death of the entire college of apostles. However, given the nature of the task of the church in verse

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119. *Ibid.*, 822-23.

19 to bind and loose by means of the keys of the kingdom, neither can we altogether dismiss the idea that the gates of Hell have reference to the counsel of the ungodly (Psalm 1:1 cf. 1:5). The elders of a city sat in “the gates of the city”<sup>[120]</sup> and the gates could therefore well stand metonymically for an anti-gospel from an anti-Christ.

Further, it is difficult to tell from this section just what the Professor intends for us to understand by his phrase “his assembly would be a *worldwide* entity, for this appears to be the connotation of the word here.” Perhaps what Reymond has in mind for us to understand is not so much connotation as context. Surely in the context of making this announcement there could be some significance in the fact that Christ made it not in the shadow of the soon to be destroyed temple at Jerusalem, but in the coasts of Caesarea Philippi. While Caesarea Philippi would perhaps not have been so foreign a location as Tyre or Damascus, nevertheless sitting as it does on the southwestern slope of Mount Hermon it is about as far north as one could go and still be considered as within the borders of ancient Israel.<sup>[121]</sup> Thus the location may speak more to the fact that Christ’s assembly is now worldwide than does whatever Professor Reymond had in mind by his use of the term “connotation.”

The other passage in Matthew’s gospel in which we find Christ using the Greek *ekklesia* is also a very informative passage for more reasons than one. Perhaps significantly the other use of *ekklesia*

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120. See, for example Deuteronomy 16:18; 17:5, 8; Proverbs 31:22; etc.

121. D. F. Payne, “Caesarea Philippi,” in *The New Bible Dictionary*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1962), *in loco*.

comes in the context in which the church is called upon to settle a dispute between brothers, one of whom has purportedly sinned against the other. The outcome when someone neglects or refuses to “hear the church” is that he is treated as “an heathen man and a publican” or *hosper ho ethnikos kai ho telones*. To the Jew of Jesus’ day, the use of either term “*ethnikos*” or “*telones*” could be used to refer to one outside the covenant. Christ’s use of both terms together with the connective *kai* emphasizes that he intends the one who refuses to hear the church to be regarded as “outside the covenant people of God.” The particular Scripture in view is Matthew 18:17, which of course occurs in the wider context of Matthew 18:15-20.

Christ did not proceed by saying that his subject would be that of church discipline. The subject at hand was not church discipline *as such*, but the removal of offenses between purported brothers. Modern translations may not be quite so clear, but in both the Greek New Testament and those translations that consistently distinguish second person singular from second person plural, it is quite evident that what is in view in Matthew 18:15ff. is what *began* at least as a private offense. The passage begins with the assumption that *thy* (singular) brother has sinned against *thee* (again, singular). After attempting to resolve the offense within the smallest possible circle (first *alone* and then with the *minimum* number of witnesses, as at Deuteronomy 19:15), if the offender either insists that he is innocent or if he persists unrepentantly in the offense, then the offended brother is commanded to “tell the church” (Matthew 18:17).

There is a seeming presumption when Christ told his disciples to “tell the church” that the church would actually be able to *do something positive* to help resolve the conflict. In point of fact, Christ

seems in the passage to be setting forth a sort of “worst case scenario” in which the offending party remains contumacious against all reason. Of course, if the offending party should relinquish his position and repent at any point in these proceedings, then “thou has regained thy brother.” Calvin explained this presumption that the church has a certain authority of binding and loosing in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* as depending, “entirely upon the keys which, in the eighteenth chapter of Matthew, Christ gave to the church. There he commands that those who are contemptuous of private warnings be severely warned in the name of the people; but if they persist in the stubbornness, He teaches that they should be cut off from the believers’ fellowship (Matthew 18:15-18). Now these admonitions and corrections cannot be made without investigation of the cause; accordingly, some court of judgment and order of procedure are needed. Therefore, if we do not wish to make void the promise of the keys and banish excommunication, solemn warnings, and such things, we must give the church some jurisdiction.”<sup>{122}</sup>

Similarly, commenting on this place, Matthew Henry pointed out, “it is plain that he means a Christian church, which though not yet formed, was now in the embryo.... Tell it to the guides and governors of the church, the minister or ministers, the elders or deacons, or (if such the constitution of society be) tell it to the representatives or heads of the congregation, or to the members of it; let them examine the matter and, if they find the complaint frivolous and groundless, let them rebuke the complainant; if they find it just, let them rebuke the

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122. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960) Volumes I-II. Ford Lewis Battles, trans., IV.xi.1.

offender, and call him to repentance,.... While ministers preach the word of Christ faithfully, and in their government of the church strictly adhere to his laws (*clave non errante* — the key not turning the wrong way), they may be assured that he will own them, and stand by them, and will ratify what they say and do, so that it shall be taken as said and done of himself.”<sup>{123}</sup>

In this entire passage we see the continuity between the Old Testament requirements for preceding against a brother to clear a fault and the authority of the church in the New Testament to adjudicate a matter in compliance with *the same procedures*. Here Deuteronomy 19:15 seems to be in the background of Matthew 18:16. The Deuteronomy passage assures the accused of a trial in which the word of the accuser *alone* will not be sufficient to prove his guilt (else an accusation would become a proof): “One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth: at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall the matter be established” (Deuteronomy 19:15). Christ anticipated a day in which the ability of Simon Peter to discern directly the intentions of Ananias and Sapphira or the thoughts and desires of Simon Magus would pass away and the eldership would be cast upon ordinary means to establish a matter in ecclesiastical adjudication. And once the church leaders have entered a biblical judgment in a matter, the congregation as such should consent to the judgment by refusing the society of those thus cast out (let him be to thee as a heathen man and a publican). As Calvin commented on this place, “But in order that he

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123. Matthew Henry, *A Commentary on the Whole Bible*, (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., n.d.), *in loco*.

might be more easily understood by the ignorant, Christ borrowed a mode of expression from what was then customary among his nation; and the meaning is, that we ought to have no intercourse with the despisers of *the church* till they repent.”<sup>[124]</sup>

Yet although the leadership could adjudicate a case between brothers, even if it were as few as two or three member/judges, we must still recall that the church guides had no inherent authority to make up rules as they went along. Christ envisioned a church in which he would be the sole law-giver (James 4:12) and the only authority the church guides had would be to apply his laws in specific cases of dispute between brothers. As the *Harper’s Bible Commentary* points out, “One would also suppose that Matthew’s church, with its strong Jewish roots, already had a Presbyterial organization like that of the synagogue from which it sprang. One must suppose that if this was so, then Matthew was anxious to portray the presbyters of his community as possessing no inherent authority of their own, but as simply the instruments through which the church exercised the authority that had devolved upon it from the apostles.... Office bearers must not arrogate to themselves personal honors, titles, or privileges, like the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23:8-9).... The office was performed by representatives of the whole community whose task was to point away from themselves to God, the only true teacher and father.”<sup>[125]</sup> While dis-

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124. John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries: Harmony of the Gospels*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1984), *in loco*.

125. James L. Mayes, editor, *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1988), *in loco*.



agreeing with the *Harper's* commentator's presupposition that Matthew spoke somehow of "Matthew's church," we must agree that constitutional Presbyterian government does not involve an authority inherent in the presbyter and that it points in the style of the steeple away from itself and toward heaven.

One final thought on this passage will conclude this section and chapter. True as it is that Christ used the term "heathen" (*ethnikos* or *goy*) to evoke a genuine and deep-seated contempt for someone who refuses the church's authority, we must at the same time acknowledge that Christ was defining a heathen as someone who is outside the new commonwealth of Israel — the *ekklesia* that consists of those who are both (former) Jews and (former) Gentiles. Professor Reymond discusses this idea, pointedly demonstrating that Christ's church *is* the "Israel of God." Reymond states, "Jesus' *ekklesia* is to be viewed not only as Messiah's assembly and the redemptive expression of the kingdom of God, but also as the 'Israel of God' (see Galatians 6:16). And Gentiles who come into this *ekklesia*, as Paul would later declare, 'have been brought near' to the 'commonwealth [*politeias*] of Israel' and Israel's 'covenants of promise' (Ephesians 2:12-13), and in this new relationship have become 'the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh' (Philippians 3:3; see also Paul's metaphor of the two olive trees in Romans 11:16-24), and with elect Jews are God's 'new man' (Ephesians 2:14-16). Jesus' *ekklesia* then is the true New Testament 'assembly of the Lord' and thus the continuing expression of that spiritual 'Israel' within Old Testament national Israel of which Paul speaks (Romans 9:6). That is to say, just as there was a true spiritual 'Israel' within Old Testament national Israel, so also Jesus' *ekklesia*, as the Israel of God, exists within professing Christendom."<sup>{126}</sup>

## 4. OLD TESTAMENT CHURCH GOVERNMENT

### *THE OLD TESTAMENT ECCLESIASTICAL SANHEDRIN*

This dissertation has and will assert or presume at certain places in the body that there was a distinct ecclesiastical Sanhedrin in Old Testament Israel. To support such an assertion, it is common to point to Second Chronicles chapter nineteen and the reformation of the southern kingdom under Jehoshaphat. There, at verse 11, the reformation quite clearly indicates that there were separate heads for “matters of the LORD” and for “all the king’s matter.”<sup>{127}</sup> Given the fact that the chief priest Amariah (*kohen haro’sh*) is over the matters of the Lord and a Judahite, Zebediah, is over the king’s matters, there is a pretty strong presumption in favor of a dual court system, whether co-located or not, and perhaps even hearing some of the same cases with an eye to the distinct ecclesiastical and civil concerns involved in each case.<sup>{128}</sup>

#### *Exodus 24:1*

The first appearance of a specifically ecclesiastical Sanhedrin, as opposed merely to the existence of elders,<sup>{129}</sup> seems to be at Exodus

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126. Reymond, *op. cit.*, 824.

127. See below in this Chapter for a detailed treatment of Second Chronicles chapter nineteen.

24:1 where God called not only Moses and Aaron, but seventy of the elders to “come up.” We should note that at that point in time in the history of Israel there was not yet a cultic establishment. Therefore the sacrifices were performed in Exodus twenty-three by “young boys” rather than by Aaron and his sons. Aaron and his sons would not be set apart for office until Exodus chapter twenty-eight and following. The understanding of this dissertation is that the elders of Exodus twenty-four were not the seventy elders chosen for governing the commonwealth of Israel in Numbers chapter eleven, nor were they the elders or judges chosen on the advice of Jethro in Exodus chapter eighteen. Rather these men were chosen as the first group of seventy elders and would become the foundation for the Old Testament ecclesiastical Sanhedrin.

The group of seventy elders of Exodus 24:1 was not the same as the group in Numbers 11:16ff., because the elders in Exodus chapter twenty-four were chosen shortly after the children of Israel came out

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128. Although it is possible to distinguish between two court “systems” in the Old Testament, it would be incorrect to suppose that some cases were of a strictly ecclesiastical nature while others were of a strictly civil nature. Likewise, most of the Old Testament legislation contained both ecclesiastical and civil aspects and applications.

129. As in English, the Hebrew word for ‘elder’ is related to the adjective ‘old.’ Apart from an actual ecclesiastical or civil function revealed in the context it would be impossible to say with certainty whether the term “elder” at a given Scripture referred to an office-holder or simply to an old man and whether the office was civil, ecclesiastical, or both.

of Egypt and while they were still at Mount Sinai. But on the twentieth day of the second month, in the second year they moved their encampment from Sinai to the Paran wilderness (Numbers 10:11-12). While in the wilderness of Paran they pitched their tents at *Hibroth-hataavah* (Numbers 33:16). It was at that encampment at *Hibroth-hataavah* that the seventy were chosen to relieve Moses of the burden of government, as Jethro had earlier advised in Exodus chapter eighteen. So the choosing of the seventy in Exodus twenty-four was prior to the choosing of the seventy in Numbers eleven and not at the same time.

But neither is it likely that the seventy elders of Exodus 24:1 are the elders of Exodus eighteen, in which passage Jethro *advised* his son-in-law Moses to establish elders in broader and narrower courts according to population in order to help him with the task of judging the people. Though Exodus eighteen is, of course, prior to chapter twenty-four in the internal structure of the book of Exodus, it is the opinion of some Reformed and Presbyterian scholars that chapter eighteen actually anticipates an episode that took place *after* chapter twenty-four chronologically and was perhaps never implemented until the episode at *Hibroth-hataavah* in Numbers chapter eleven.<sup>{130}</sup> The evidence is not overwhelmingly compelling in this author's opinion, yet it does seem to make sense of all the data and is therefore coherent. The time line is such that Jethro did not come to Moses until about a year after the coming up from Egypt. The law was given on the third day after the children of Israel came to Sinai. But Tostatus

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130. Gillespie, *Aaron's Rod Blossoming*, p. 5 and citing also Willet and Tostatus in Commentaries on this passage in Exodus chapter 24.

claimed that it was impossible that Jethro could have heard that Moses and the people were at Sinai; that Moses could have gone forth to greet him and entertain him; that Jethro could have observed the manner of Moses' government and given counsel to set it in better shape and; that Moses could have taken all the steps necessary to rectify his government all in the space of three days. These days were also appointed specifically for the sanctifying of the people and so it is no small question whether Moses would even have been hearing cases during those days. Finally, one must consider that the elders of Exodus twenty-four could not have been civil judges before Jethro came or else Jethro would not have observed that Moses was hearing all the cases without assistance.

We should further note that the seventy elders who were chosen in Exodus twenty-four were invested with the authority to judge the very matters in which Aaron or Hur presided. "And he said unto the elders, Tarry ye here for us, until we come again unto you: and behold Aaron and Hur are with you: if any man have any matters to do, let him come unto them" (Exodus 24:14).

These seventy elders were joined in the company with Aaron, Nadab and, Abihu and were called up into the mount along with them. The section of Exodus in which this occurs follows the giving of the judicial or civil laws to Israel in chapters twenty-one to twenty-three. Chapter twenty-four forms a sort of transition or even an introduction to the section of Exodus that follows and which deals more specifically with the ceremonial or cultic laws of Israel. It is also noteworthy that these seventy elders had no function in the civil cases and suits regarding the magisterial government, for in Numbers chapter eleven,

which was still future to the events in Exodus chapter twenty-four, Moses still judged civil cases single-handedly.

Last of all, these elders in Exodus chapter twenty-four seem to be inducted into office in the context of specifically ecclesiastical ceremonies rather than civil ceremonies with a religious cast. Of course ancient Israel was not a secular nation (few nations ever have been) and so the civil and ecclesiastical cannot be altogether divorced. Yet the concomitants of installation all have an ecclesiastical context more similar to Aaron's anointing than to either Saul's (First Samuel 10:1ff.) or to David's (First Samuel 16:13). First the covenant was ratified immediately upon the selection of the seventy elders, and that in the context of sacrifice and offering (verses 5 to 8). Second, the elders received an epiphany in the context of eating what must certainly have been regarded as a covenantal meal. "And they saw the God of Israel...also they saw God, and did eat and drink" (verses 10 and 11).

These trains of thought taken together seem to invest these elders with an ecclesiastical authority and with *no* civil authority. But if they have ecclesiastical authority without also having civil authority, then they are a distinct ecclesiastical government. Consider: they are accompanied by those whom God chose to be priests (Hebrews 5:4); they had a certain authority to judge of some matters (Exodus 24:14), but not of others (Numbers 11:14); they entered office via a sacred banquet which may even have included the eating of holy things offered to the Lord (Exodus 24:5, 10, 11). Though it was still quite early in the life of the Jewish church in Exodus 24 and therefore things are often seen in Scripture at that point in embryonic forms, still one can see in Exodus chapter 24 an eldership of seventy that is distinct from civil judges.

### *Deuteronomy 17:8*

The next evidence of an ecclesiastical government or Sanhedrin can be taken from Deuteronomy 17:8-13. In that passage we may observe several indications of distinct ecclesiastical and civil governments. First, virtually all Reformed commentators agree that this passage sets forth at the very least a Supreme Court of civil judges. Traditionally the authority of the civil Sanhedrin has been based upon this very text. Calvin went so far as to say that the civil alone is in view in the passage: “for although God seems only to refer to civil controversies, yet there is no doubt but that by synecdoche He appoints them to be interpreters of the doctrine of the Law.”<sup>{131}</sup> Keil and Delitzsch’s commentary on this passage is also instructive, where they correctly pointed out that the issue in Deuteronomy chapter seventeen has nothing to do with an appeal by a losing party to a dispute. “This is evident,” the professors informed us, “from the general fact, that the Mosaic law never recognizes any appeal to higher courts by the different *parties* to a lawsuit, and that in this case also it is not assumed, since all that is enjoined is, that if the matter should be too difficult for the local judges to decide, *they themselves* were to carry it to the *superior court*.”<sup>{132}</sup> The commentary continues on to indicate regarding verse 10, “And this is more especially evident from what is stated in ver. 10, with regard to the decisions of the *superior court*, namely that they were to do whatever the superior judges taught, without deviating to the right hand or to the left.”<sup>{133}</sup> Regardless, however,

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131. Calvin, *Commentaries: Harmony of the Four Last Books of Moses* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984 reprint), 2.262.

132. Keil & Delitzsch, *op. cit.*, I.iii.382. Emphasis added.

of whether we regard the supreme court as receiving appeals from parties or from the lower courts, it must be acknowledged that there exists in this passage a *final* court of appeal — a court beyond which one could not properly appeal and to whose judgment one must therefore acquiesce.

But if this passage indicates a supreme civil court, then it seems by the same parity of reasoning to hold forth a supreme ecclesiastical jurisdiction as well. The passage does not resolve civil cases with the judgment of the high priest, nor does it resolve ecclesiastical cases with the judgment of the judge(s). Rather, in verse nine the sentence of the priest(s) is carried as far as is the sentence of the judge(s) who “shall be in that day.” Further, as George Gillespie pointed out, the sentence was carried forth “in a disjunctive way, as two powers, not one, and each of them binding respectively in its proper sphere.”<sup>{134}</sup> While the objection might be made that the priest was there merely as a teacher of the law to help interpret the law for the civil judge, this dissertation does not agree with such an assessment. Verse 12 indicates that there is a disjunction between the priest that stands to minister and the judge who shall be in that day. The priest is to be obeyed. He will give authoritative, and not merely advisory, legal opinion. It was not merely that the opinion would be binding upon the judge; it would be binding also on the parties to the case.

A second consideration from the Deuteronomy seventeen passage has to do with the three categories mentioned that might be too hard

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133. *Ibid.*, Emphasis added.

134. Gillespie, *op. cit.*, p. 6.



for the local justices to determine for themselves. These categories are characterized in the Authorized Version as “between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke” (Deuteronomy 17:8). Although R. J. Rushdoony has indicated that a correct understanding of these distinctions comes down to a practical application of God’s law, he limits the understanding of this passage to matters civil. Thus Rushdoony maintains, “The expression in Deuteronomy 17:8, ‘between blood and blood,’ means a decision between murder and manslaughter. ‘Between plea and plea’ means between one type of plea for right as against another. ‘Between stroke and stroke refers to varieties of bodily injury; ‘matters of controversy with thy gates’ means matters of controversy within the community. In these very practical questions of law and the application of the law, the ultimate authority that binds and looses is God’s law-word. This law must govern the court, and the court must at the very least be fully grounded in the law.”<sup>[135]</sup> This dissertation certainly adopts the view that sees biblical law as the basis for all court decisions in Old Testament Israel. But in this author’s opinion there is a wider consideration in Deuteronomy chapter seventeen than Dr. Rushdoony expounds in his *Institutes*.

Unquestionably, it could be agreed, the first matter of blood and blood is a community or civil matter.<sup>[136]</sup> However the third question — which at first *seems* to be a matter for civil litigation — may *actu-*

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135. R. J. Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law* (Nutley, NJ: The Craig Press, 1973), 620.

136. Though it could be argued that the “blood and blood” refers even here to consanguinity as it does elsewhere.

*ally* be a matter for the priest. And if it is a matter for the priest, then it follows that the priest's court would have a primarily ecclesiastical jurisdiction. The Hebrew word “*nega`*,” translated in verse 8 as “stroke” is the *same thing* that the priest is to determine as to whether or not a skin eruption or other matter is a *leprosy*.<sup>[137]</sup> If the first matter is civil and the last matter is for the priest, what is “plea for plea” or “between plea and plea?” The Hebrew word translated as “plea” is “*din*” as in “*beth din*” or house of judging. Thus the plea may be common to both civil and ecclesiastical. It may be remembered that the tribe of Dan was named because God is judge. So, a *beth din* is a house of judging or house of judgment. The application of the *beth din* to the New Testament church as well as the Old Testament church will be discussed further in subsequent chapters.

Significantly also, the conjunction “or” is used in verse 13 indicating yet again two jurisdictions that can be and ought to be distinguished. This is demonstrated in the Hebrew ‘*o*, the LXX’s *ê* as well as our Authorized Version. The Greek *ê* is a disjunctive that separates opposites.<sup>[138]</sup> So it is used in just that way in the New Testament in such verses as Matthew 5:36 “white *or* black,” Revelation 3:15 “cold *or* hot,” and Matthew 21:25 “from God *or* from men.” The Hebrew particle ‘*o* also carries the connotation of “or rather” or “or else.”<sup>[139]</sup> It is therefore the burden of verse 12 that cases on appeal will go to an ecclesiastical court *or* to a civil court at Jerusalem.

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137. Neither is this so far-fetched as may seem at first. The Vulgate translates this phrase as “*causam lepram et non lepram.*”

138. Arndt & Gingrich, *op. cit.*, pp. 342-43.

There may also be a distinction in the passage between jurisdictions or sentences. Verse eleven speaks of both “the sentence of the law which they shall teach there,” and “the judgment which they shall tell thee.” It is well established in Scripture that the priests were given an accountability to teach the meaning of the law of God. “For the priest’s [not the judge’s — RB] lips should preserve knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth” (Malachi 2:7). There is a distinction, then, not only of persons (priest and judge), but also of sentence (law and judgment), and of controversy (blood and leprosy). This certainly goes a long way toward demonstrating that each had a right of judgment and further that their respective judgments were supreme *in suo genere*. If it was a controversy that was in its substance a cultic or ceremonial issue (between leprosy and leprosy) as Leviticus 10:9-11 or Ezekiel 22:26 or if it was a fundamentally doctrinal matter, then he that would not follow the sentence of the priest who was the president of the ecclesiastical Sanhedrin must die the death (Deuteronomy 17:10-12). But if the cause was criminal, or between blood and blood, and the guilty party would not submit to the decree of the civil Sanhedrin at Jerusalem, then he should die the death. When the priest — the president of the ecclesiastical Sanhedrin — brought sufficient warrant from Scripture for the judgment he passed (Ezekiel 44:23-24), he who contumaciously disobeyed him also disobeyed God (Luke 10:16; Matthew 10:14). A competent adjudication based upon the Word of God must be obeyed.

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139. Richard Whitaker, Ed. *The Abridged Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), *in loco*.

### *First Chronicles 23:3*

A third line of argumentation proceeds from the reordering of the Levites by David. In First Chronicles chapter twenty-three all the Levites over the age of thirty were numbered and found to be 38,000 (verse 3). Of the 38,000, a number of 24,000 were to “set forward” the work of the house of the Lord. The “setting forward” is more clearly defined in verses 28-32 and basically includes everything *except* the functions delegated specifically to the priests alone to do.<sup>[140]</sup> Another 8,000 were made porters and “praisers with instruments” (verse 5). In the midst of this arrangement of *temple duty*, David designated 6,000 Levites to be “officers and judges.”

Strictly speaking, the *shophtim* (judges) were those who gave sentence and the *shotrim* were those who ensured the execution or the carrying out of the sentence.<sup>[141]</sup> There is no linguistic reason to think that the designation of the office was strictly ecclesiastical, for there were civil officers with the same title. So it was that Chenaniah and his sons were also “officers and judges” (First Chronicles 26:29). Thus there were 6,000 Levites whose specific (and apparently sole) function it was to be “officers and judges.” But it is altogether unreasonable to suppose that it would have required 6,000 officers and judges to be over only 32,000 other Levites. The ratio of one to ten is

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140. Keil & Delitzsch, *op. cit.*, III.ii.253.

141. Or the *shotrim* may simply have been recording clerks. The word is clearly a gal active participle of an unused verb *shatar*. The participle is used to describe the prefects of the people in Egypt in Exodus 5:6-19 and is therefore an ancient designation.

as low as Scripture ever goes for judges, but this would be a ratio on the order of one judge for each five and one third Levites).

Rather, we should understand these 6,000 Levites to have the task of judging and giving sentence when any controversy was brought from outlying districts of the land. We see in these officers and judges the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 17:8-13, discussed earlier in this chapter. It is also possible, though not explicit, that they served either in courses as the priests did or that they were divided according to the various tribal districts in Israel. If anyone would object that these Levites were the Levites spread out through various cities, far from contradicting the idea that these were ecclesiastical officers, the objection would simply demonstrate ecclesiastical government existed throughout the land. Yet they would then have been subordinate to the ecclesiastical Sanhedrin at Jerusalem *as lower courts*.

But we must follow David's story to its conclusion. In First Chronicles 28:1 we read, "And David assembled all the princes of Israel, the princes of the tribes, and the captains of the companies that ministered to the king by course, and the captains over the thousands, and captains over the hundreds, and the stewards over all the substance and possession of the king, and of his sons, with the officers, and with the mighty men, and with all the valiant men, unto Jerusalem." Surely no biblical student would maintain that the Levites were officers and judges of the same *kind*, in the same *manner*, or for the same *ends* with the civil rulers, judges, and military commanders in Israel. Nor should any biblical student maintain that there was no distinction between the power of ruling (binding) given to the Levites and the power of ruling (binding) given to the Princes respectively. But if we admit of a distinction, it is *that very distinction* that this dis-

sertation maintains distinguishes between civil and ecclesiastical government in Old Testament Israel.

Much of the difficulty in making this proper distinction arises, in this author's opinion, from the fact that there was not a civil (or judicial) law in Old Testament Israel apart from the law of God. Thus the civil courts and ecclesiastical courts were both working from the same *corpus juris*. There was not a separate *corpus juris canonici*, and so it is an easy and even natural conclusion that if we see the same laws and the same people being governed that we must also be seeing a single court *system*. Here is where the Presbyterian understanding of ecclesiastical government diverges from the Erastian view that the civil magistrate is the governor of the church. But at the same time the Presbyterian understanding diverges from that of the Roman state church that places the claims of the Roman antichrist over the civil magistrate in respect to civil matters. It is in part due to this understanding of the Old Testament distinctions between civil and ecclesiastical government that the Westminster divines proclaimed, "The Lord Jesus, as king and head of his church, hath therein appointed a government in the hand of church-officers, *distinct from the civil magistrate*"<sup>{142}</sup> and in that statement repudiated Erastianism. In the same document the divines also repudiated the claim that ecclesiastical government has any business meddling (or "intermeddling" as they said) with the affairs of civil government. "Synods and councils are to handle or conclude nothing but that which is ecclesiastical; and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs, which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition, in cases extraordinary; or by way of

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142. WCF XXX.1, *Confession*, 120.

advice for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.”<sup>{143}</sup>

### *Second Chronicles 19:8*

The fourth passage that provides evidence of an ecclesiastical government and Sanhedrin in Old Testament Israel distinct from civil government is Second Chronicles 19:8-11, alluded to earlier, when Jehoshaphat restored the church government that was first instituted by Moses and later settled by David. “Moreover in Jerusalem did Jehoshaphat set of the Levites, and of the priests, and of the chief of the fathers of Israel, for the judgment of the Lord and for controversies,” etc. There is no question over whether a civil Sanhedrin existed. What must be proved is that there was in Jerusalem, side by side with the civil government, a distinct ecclesiastical government. The passage in Second Chronicles provides for a court made up of ecclesiastical members, judging ecclesiastical causes, for an ecclesiastical end, having final authority to decide matters brought from inferior courts, moderated by an ecclesiastical president, and whose sentence was put into effect by ecclesiastical officers. But that is just what would constitute a distinct ecclesiastical Sanhedrin. One may wish to call it by some other name, but in proving the parts we shall prove the whole.<sup>{144}</sup>

First, in this passage we find Levites and priests as members of the court together with certain of the “chief of the fathers of Israel” who together made up the government of the church. This is the very passage adduced by the Westminster Assembly of divines for their

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143. WCF XXXI.5, *Confession*, 123.

statement, “As there were in the Jewish church elders of the people joined with the priests and Levites in the government of the church;” etc.<sup>{145}</sup> Further, according to Gillespie, this is the passage adduced by Protestants against the Roman apologist Robert Bellarmine to prove that others than “clergy” ought to have a voice in church councils.<sup>{146}</sup>

Second, this court was judging ecclesiastical cases. Those cases or controversies were called by the name of “the judgment of the Lord” in verse eight and “the matters of the Lord” in verse 11 to distinguish them from “the king’s matters.”<sup>{147}</sup> The nature of a controversy such as “between blood and blood” may refer to the distinction between unintentional man killing as opposed to “lying in wait” (i.e. with premeditation). However, it is also quite possible and some commentators would even say likely, that what is in view is the law regarding consanguinity in marriage.<sup>{148}</sup> The phrase “ye shall warn

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144. Some may wish to call this “duck logic.” If something quacks like a duck, and waddles like a duck, and flies like a duck and has a bill like a duck, and is always found in company with known ducks, it is most likely a duck. Lawyers often set forth this same principle with the saying, “if you hear hoof-beats, think ‘horses,’ not ‘zebras.’” The present author is aware of the fallacy of composition, and has not committed it with this argument. The author is not attributing the characteristics of the parts to the whole, but demonstrating how each of the parts is consistent with the whole.

145. “The Form of Church-Government,” in *Confession*, 402.

146. Gillespie, *op.cit.*, 8.

147. *ḍbar YHWH* and *ḍbar hammelek* respectively.



them” in verse 10 certainly seems to have more in common with synodic decrees (cp. Acts 16:4) than with civil punishments such as restitution, fines, and corporal punishments.

Third, the court had an ecclesiastical end — “Ye shall warn them that they trespass not against the Lord.” Jehoshaphat did not charge them to warn the lower courts not to sin “against one another,” but “against the Lord.” This seems to be for two reasons primarily. The first reason would be that this court would be involved not so much in tort law and criminal law as in first table offenses. But secondly, even in the case of trespasses and controversies involving personal injury or public criminality the supreme court was tasked with warning the lower courts not to mistake or misunderstand the law — they were to determine the law and its intent such that they not trespass against the giver of the law.<sup>{149}</sup>

Fourth, cases could come before them from the outlying cities (whether by appeal or by reference is immaterial in this respect). When such a case came before the court they were required to “finally decide” it. Their decision was ultimate and therefore it was *the* authoritative determination of the case. There was not a civil court to which the litigation could then be appealed. If there were, then the ecclesiastical system would, in its final determinations, have been subordinate to the civil system. That would have made the Old Testament system fundamentally Erastian in its nature. This was the point that the Erastians in the Westminster Assembly thought was their strongest; and it

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148. *E.g.*, Gillette in *op. cit.*

149. Matthew Henry, *op. cit.*, *in loco.*

was the point that they finally had to concede to the Presbyterians after the learned Gillespie arrived. William M. Hetherington described some of the difficulties the Erastians experienced with the young Gillespie:

“When the subject was resumed, another direction was given to the discussion by Selden, who produced a long and learned argument to prove that the passage of Scripture in question contained no authority for ecclesiastical jurisdiction. His object was, to guard against any conclusion of the Assembly, which might contradict the Erastian theory, and therefore he laboured to represent the whole as relating to the ordinary practice of the Jews in their common courts; by whom as he asserted, one sentence was excommunication, pronounced by the civil court. Herle and Marshall both attempted answers, but, says Lightfoot, ‘so as I confess gave me no satisfaction.’ Gillespie then came to the rescue, and in a speech of astonishing power and acuteness, completely confuted Selden, even on his own chosen ground, and where his strength was greatest. He proved that the passage could not mean a civil court,... This appears to have been the speech referred to by Wodrow, and of which there still exist many traditionary anecdotes, illustrative of the very extraordinary effect produced upon all that heard it. Selden himself is reported to have said at its conclusion, ‘That young man, by this single speech, has swept away the labours of ten years of my life;’ and it is remarkable that Selden made no attempt to reply to Gillespie, though he answered some of the arguments used by others who

spoke after him.”<sup>{150}</sup>

Fifth, this court had a clearly ecclesiastical moderator or president. Verse eleven maintains “Amariah the chief priest is over you in all matters of the LORD” whereas Zebediah, of the tribe of Judah, was Prime Minister respecting civil matters — or the king’s matters. Amariah was not merely present as another voting member. He was *over* the court as its prolocutor.<sup>{151}</sup> This diversity of having not a single head, but two heads, is enough to prove two bodies. Any creature with two heads but a single body is a monstrosity. But here we dare not accuse Jehoshaphat of creating a monstrosity. Therefore there were two bodies. The same man might be the member of two bodies — a civil and an ecclesiastical — or he may be a member of three or four courts without causing a puzzle to us. But for the same court to have two presidents would be strange at least. So the distinction of presidents and of subject matter to each president, makes two distinct courts.

Sixth, and finally, the court had ecclesiastical officers to put its sentences into effect. In verse 11 we read, “The Levites shall be officers before you.” As we saw in First Chronicles 23:26, some of the Levites were *shophtim* and others were *shot<sup>r</sup>rim*. The latter were the officers to see that the sentence of the *shophtim* was put into effect, and to cause those who would otherwise be refractory to obey the

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150. William M. Hetherington, *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*, (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991 reprint of 1856 third edition), 201-202.

151. Hebrew *ʿaleykem*.

court. So also in this passage some of the Levites were appointed to judge and others were appointed to carry out the ecclesiastical censures. Levites were appointed to carry out the censures in part to obviate the possibility of the civil sword being used to place church censures into effect.

### ***Jeremiah 26:7-9***

A fifth passage that might be adduced comes more to observation than to precept, but nevertheless counts as evidence for the *existence* of a distinct ecclesiastical court, whether by *jus divinum* or some other reason. Jeremiah chapter twenty-six sets forth a distinction of authority between the court of the priests and prophets in verses 7 to 9 and the court of the princes of Judah in verses 10 through 24. The prophets spoken of here in Jeremiah were not true prophets of God, but clearly were false prophets. Yet even in that capacity of prophet (whether true or false matters not) they had the authority to summon Jeremiah before them (i.e., they “took” him in verse 8). In this court, Jeremiah was accused and convicted (wrongly of course — it would be more accurate to say he was convicted even before he was taken) of being a false prophet, verse 9. Yet though they had judged him worthy to die, he was acquitted by the court of the princes in verses 10, 11, and 16.

Then in verses 17 and following “certain of the elders of the land” gave the justification for their decision to *reverse* the ecclesiastical court. An Erastian may be inclined to cite this passage to prove an appeal from an ecclesiastical court to a civil court. We will take from the Erastian what he gives, viz., that there was a distinction of courts. But we disagree with the Erastian idea that this constitutes a process to be followed in every Old Testament ecclesiastical case; and that for

two reasons. First, the court of the priests and prophets had no power of capital punishment. If they had, then they would simply have signed Jeremiah's death warrant and would have been done with him.

The reason Jeremiah's case went from one court to another was due to the fact that the ecclesiastical court was calling for a sentence that it did not have authority *in itself* to carry out. There must be a concurrence of the civil court to carry out a corporal sentence. Yet second, the court *did* have a power to judge Jeremiah as a false prophet, and one who *ought* to be punished in a certain way corporally according to the law of God. Their judgment was wrong respecting Jeremiah's guilt, but their jurisdiction was never denied: not by them, nor by Jeremiah, nor by the court of the princes. Rather, what the court of the princes determined was that the court of the priests and prophets applied a wrong standard to Jeremiah's case. The priests' and prophets' court applied a standard that maintained that anyone speaking against the temple was worthy of death. The civil court reversed the judgment because Jeremiah had done nothing truly worthy of death. The justification for the reversal contained both principle and precedent — very much as we would expect from a separate court. Had the civil court carried out the sentence, it would have become a partaker of the ecclesiastical court's sin.

### ***Jeremiah 18:18***

A sixth Scripture that may be brought forth to intimate a separate ecclesiastical Sanhedrin is Jeremiah 18:18. In that verse, Jeremiah's adversaries said, "Come, and let us devise devices against Jeremiah; for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, and let us smite him with the

tongue, and let us not give heed to any of his words.” Jeremiah’s persecutors were committing the genetic fallacy or an argument from [false] authority. The force of their argument lay in the fact that because those who are of the greatest authority in the church disagree with Jeremiah and he must therefore be a false prophet. These accusers made the same error that the followers of the Pope continue to make — they thought that “the church” could not err. But where would they get such an idea? Certainly they must have adduced the law of the Sanhedrin in Deuteronomy 17:10-12, “And thou shalt do according to the sentence which they of that place which the Lord shall choose shall show thee; and thou shalt observe to do according to all that they inform thee: according to the sentence of the law which they shall teach thee, and according to the judgment which they shall tell thee, thou shalt do: thou shalt not decline from the sentence which they shall shew thee, to the right hand nor to the left. And the man that will do presumptuously, and will not hearken unto the priest that standeth to minister there before the LORD thy God, or unto the judge, even that man shall die: and thou shalt put away the evil from Israel.”

A *mis*application of the law of the Sanhedrin would cause them to think that a duly appointed council of priests, wise men so-called, and prophets could not err. Therefore they preferred the pronouncements of the ecclesiastical Sanhedrin to the word of the Lord from Jeremiah. This seems to be an ecclesiastical Sanhedrin rather than a civil Sanhedrin. This conclusion follows for several reasons.

First, they make no mention of the judge from Deuteronomy seventeen, but only of the priests and prophets and the *wise*, by which we should understand those who excelled in the knowledge of the law of God. Thus Christ referred to his disciples in Matthew 23:34. So, too,

Jeremiah 8:8-9 defines the wise in terms of those who know the law of the Lord (even though they really did *not* know it). Isaiah distinguished in Isaiah 3:2 between the prudent and the judge. Further if we compare Matthew 23:34 (referenced above) with Luke 11:49, we learn that “wise men” and “scribes” are semantically equivalent terms to “Apostles.”

Second, however, their determination to smite Jeremiah with the tongue fits perfectly well with an ecclesiastical Sanhedrin, but not so well with what we would expect from a civil Sanhedrin. Thus it may be that they were determined to smite him *for* his tongue, that is, for false doctrine. Or the phrase may import that they desired to smite him *in* his tongue so that by ecclesiastical censure he no longer would be permitted or licensed to preach. Or the terminology could refer to an ecclesiastical *declaration* or sentence. Then the meaning would be, “do not smite him with the sword, for that belongs only to the civil magistrate. Smite him rather with the tongue by declaring him to be a false prophet and thus ministerially and declaratively determining that controversy and that case.”<sup>{152}</sup>

### ***Ezekiel 7:26***

Seventh, we may consider Ezekiel 7:26 where we read, “...then shall they seek a vision of the prophet; but the law shall perish from the priest, and counsel from the ancients.” Once again the priests and the ancients are to be regarded collectively or jointly in session and not severally and distributively as alone. Here is the meaning: in

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152. As would be the only authority a church court would have operating according to WCF XXXI.3, *Confession*, 122.

God’s providential discipline the people would seek after a vision from the Lord, but they would not be able to find it regardless of where they looked. A person may not be disappointed or surprised if a single elder or priest or prophet had no word from the Lord because then it might be sought elsewhere. But if the entire consistory of priests and elders were devoid of wisdom and counsel and knowledge of the law, then the light of Israel would become as darkness. Many Protestant writers at the time of the Reformation cited this verse to show that ecclesiastical councils can err. But if they were sensible in their citations, then they must have *regarded* this passage to have reference to such councils.<sup>{153}</sup>

### *Zechariah 7:1-3*

An eighth passage from the Old Testament also holds forth the authority, if not the form, of a distinct ecclesiastical council and that is Zechariah 7:1-3. Some Jews sent Sherezer and Regemmelech to Jerusalem or to the house of the Lord to speak to the priests and prophets who were there in that day and the question they were told to ask was “Should I weep in the fifth month, separating myself, as I have done these many years?” Here is clearly an ecclesiastical question having to do with God’s worship and possibly also having to do with a case of conscience.<sup>{154}</sup> But the reason that the Jews inquired from this council was because they clearly believed that this council had the authority to “finally decide” the controversy. By the term

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153. Gillespie, *op. cit.*, 12.

154. “It belongeth to synods and councils ministerially to determine controversies of faith, and cases of conscience;” WCF XXXI:3, *Confession*, 122.



“finally decide,” church courts convey that there is no further appeal by either party to the case.

### *The New Testament Record*

Finally, this dissertation should consult the New Testament on the matter, for it also holds out an ecclesiastical Sanhedrin among the Jews of the first century. Whether Rome had fully taken away the civil Sanhedrin in the days she ruled Palestine might be controverted. Yet there was certainly an ecclesiastical government in the hands of church officers in those days.<sup>[155]</sup> Note first, there was a council that consisted of the priests, elders, and scribes (Matthew 2:4; 16:21; 21:23; 26:57, 59; 27:1, 12; Mark 14:43; Luke 22:66; and Acts 4:5). Note further that the council was designated in the Greek language of the New Testament as the *presbuterion* in Luke 22:66 and Acts 17:5. But that is the *very name* Paul gave to the explicitly ecclesiastical eldership that ordained Timothy (First Timothy 4:14). It is very doubtful that the Apostle would transfer the name of an exclusively civil court to an exclusively ecclesiastical one without some explanation. Finally, note that this council examined Jesus concerning his disciples and his doctrine, received witnesses against him, and pronounced him guilty of blasphemy (Matthew 26:57, 65-66 cp. Mark 14:53-55 and John 18:19; 19:6-7; Luke 22:66; etc.).

A testimony is established in the mouths of two or three witnesses. But this chapter has called three times the required number to establish a matter: eight passages from the Old Testament, plus the testimony of the New Testament. Lest this author be misunderstood in

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155. See WCF XXX.1, *Confession*, 120.

what he thinks this chapter has demonstrated, he does *not* claim that the ecclesiastical government of the Old Testament was so clearly delineated as it is in the New Testament. Nor does this work claim that there was as clear and complete a distinction of subjects, matters, and offices as exists in the New Testament between the ecclesiastical government and the civil government. Nor does the author claim that the ecclesiastical government of the Old Testament was always limited in its censures in an identical way that the New Testament ecclesiastical government is limited.

Rather, the viewpoint of the author of this dissertation is much simpler than that. God distinguished in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament between the church and the state. The church and state were co-extensive in the Old Testament and that is no longer the case. The idea of a “national church” is really an anachronism given the fact that the church catholic (universal) is the holy nation of God today (Matthew 21:43 cp. First Peter 2:9). The church and state are no longer co-extensive with respect to their subjects and so the limits of each are much more easily discerned today. But there was a distinction, embryonic though it may have been — which of the ordinances of God was not embryonic in the Old Testament, after all — between the church government that God placed in the hands of church-officers and the civil government that God placed in the hands of others.

## 5. THE VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE DISTINCTION

### *VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE*

#### *Richness of Language*

In the previous chapter on “Terms and Definitions,” this dissertation examined the several Greek and Hebrew terms used in Scripture to refer to the church. In this chapter, it will hopefully undertake to investigate first the various aspects of the church, or the various ways in which the church should be understood theologically and organizationally. Then, in the next chapter it will examine some of the figurative and symbolic language by which Scripture refers to the church. The word for “church,” generally *ekklesia*, has a rich variety of distinct, yet inseparable and closely related, meanings in Scripture. In fact, it is because the word does not have a monolithic meaning in the New Testament that theological and exegetical distinctions can and must be made. It is important to say at the outset of this study, however, that there are not many churches, but *one* as it has existed eternally in the mind of God. These distinctions in turn, form much of the basis for our understanding of the biblical model for church government. If we contend, as we do, that Scripture provides a *jus divinum* church government; and if Scripture uses the word “church” in various aspects and meanings, then we must investigate each of those meanings in order to avoid the fallacy of equivocation or amphiboly.

### *All the elect in Christ*

The Westminster Confession of Faith begins its discussion “Of the Church,” by stating “The catholick or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof: and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.”<sup>{156}</sup> Clearly the church, when used in this sense of its invisibility, cannot be limited to a single congregation or group of congregations; nor can it be limited to a single ethnic group or race — nor can any race or ethnic grouping be excluded. All true believers alive on the earth at any given moment are members of this universal and invisible church. They may be members of various congregations, denominations, races, nationalities, etc., but they are truly one and they have been truly gathered into the invisible church by the Holy Spirit himself.

In the previous paragraph, mention was made of “true believers.” The reason for using such language is that not all faith is justifying faith. Scripture speaks of several “kinds” of faith. There is historical faith, temporary faith, and even miraculous faith — none of which saves the “believer.” If there are many kinds of faith that are not justifying faith and if a person is justified by only one of them, then it becomes important to know what the faith is that justifies and makes one a “true believer.”

The first kind of non-justifying faith is a simple historical assent that there is one God. The devils believe that and thus may be said to have this historical or demonic faith. James 2:19 informs us, “Thou

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156. WCF XXV.1, *Confession*, 107.

believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble.” The devils believe, but their “faith” is not a justifying faith — it is not the faith that makes one a true believer. Rather, it is a mere assent to the truth that there is one God, but it is not a justifying “faith in God.” An historical faith might simply be a faith that believes something happened or exists, but that is not necessarily a justifying faith. It is not a trusting or fiduciary faith. An historical faith believes a report and a testimony, but does not commit to or place confidence in Christ *alone* for salvation.

The second type of faith that is non-justifying is often characterized as “temporary faith.” In Matthew 13:20-21, in the parable of the sower and the seed, some of the seed fell into stony places. “The same is he that heareth the word, and anon [shortly] with joy receiveth it. Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for awhile.” Note he does not *endure*, but just “dures” for a while. “For when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended.” Does he believe at all? Yes, for awhile. *Temporarily* he believes. But a temporary faith, a faith that comes and goes, a faith that leaves him in time of persecution, is not a justifying faith. Such a one as he is not a true believer.

The third type of non-justifying faith is what might be termed “miraculous faith.” A miraculous faith believes in or even performs “miracles.” It is a faith that trusts in signs and wonders, but is not a justifying faith. An example can be found in First Corinthians 13:2, “though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.” In the time of the apostles, there was a faith by which even Judas could perform mira-

cles. But Judas' faith was not a justifying faith. In Second Thessalonians 2:9, Paul claimed that even Antichrist (i.e., "the man of sin") would be able to perform lying wonders such that he would be able to deceive "those who love not the truth." Yet it is impossible to assert rationally and truly that Antichrist could have a justifying faith.

A commitment is required for justifying faith. John 2:23-25 tells us, "Now when he [Jesus] was in Jerusalem at the Passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did." They too had a faith based on believing the miracles Christ performed. "But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man." In our Authorized Version we read the word "commit" in verse 24. Some of Jerusalem believed him, but he did not commit himself to them. Regardless of what historical or miraculous or temporary faith they may have had, it was not justifying because Jesus did not commit himself to them. The same root word in Greek is translated as "believe" [*pisteuo*] as it related to the men of Jerusalem and as "commit" as it related to Jesus' response to those men. The root idea of faith can be seen in this passage to be that of commitment.

When we read that God "had faith" in Romans 3:3, it was a commitment to his own word: that what he has said, he will do; what he has promised, he will perform. It is a "fiduciary faith." Latinists will recognize the word for "faith" in Latin in the English word "fiduciary." It is God's faithfulness that caused Paul to characterize him in Romans 3:3 as having faith. So too, it is in the faith that God gives us that there are certain actions that arise from faith. The actions are the products of the original commitment or faith. When this dissertation

speaks below of the *notae fidelium* (characteristics of faith), it will be the actions arising from faith(fulness) that will be primarily in view.

### ***The Invisible/Visible Distinction***

It has been common since the time of the Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to distinguish between the church visible and the church invisible.<sup>{157}</sup> In doing so, however, it is important that we do not make such an absolute bifurcation that we treat the subject in a theological or practical way as though there were two churches. As no less a Presbyterian light than John Murray pointed out, “The concept of the ‘church invisible’ is, to say the least, far too precarious upon which to build for the obligation incumbent upon us to foster unity and fellowship in the church of God.”<sup>{158}</sup>

We would disagree with the editor who named Murray’s article. Murray stated in the article itself that there are certainly invisible aspects to the church as well as visible aspects. “[T]here are those aspects pertaining to the church that may be characterized as invisible. But it is to ‘the church’ those aspects pertain, and ‘the church’ in the New Testament never appears as an invisible entity and therefore may

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157. This distinction did not begin with the Reformers. Even Augustine used this terminology, but the Reformers found it to be a useful means of explaining the indefectibility of the church. See the discussion below of Stuart Jones’ journal article on this subject.

158. John Murray, “The Church: Its Definition in Terms of ‘Visible’ and ‘Invisible’ Invalid,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth, 1976), I.235. Hereafter *Murray*, vol.page.

never be *defined* in terms of invisibility.”<sup>{159}</sup> Even James Bannerman, who went much farther than we suppose Murray would have approved, was constrained to admit, “at the outset, it is not unimportant to remark, that when we speak of the Church invisible and the Church visible, we are not to be understood as if we referred in these designations to two separate and distinct Churches, but rather to the *same Church* under two different characters.”<sup>{160}</sup> It will be the contention of this dissertation that Bannerman, after making this concession early in his discourse upon the subject of the visible/invisible distinction, inconsistently proceeded to speak against his concession at nearly every point.

Bannerman continued in his discussion of the visible and invisible distinction to say, “It [the visible church] is to be *distinguished* from the condition of the invisible Church of true believers; for although the members of the visible Church may have outwardly obeyed the call and entered into possession of the external privileges of the Church, yet the inward grace and vital union to the Saviour may be wanting, and theirs may be a relationship wholly of an outward kind. But although it be an outward relationship, and no more, it is nevertheless a real one, under whatsoever name it may be presented.”<sup>{161}</sup> In this author’s opinion, the term that Scripture uses for one who has feigned obedience to the call of the gospel is “a hypocrite.” Lest there be some misunderstanding of the issue, clearly there

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159. *Murray*, I.235.

160. J. Bannerman, *op. cit.*, I.29. Emphasis added.

161. J. Bannerman, *op. cit.*, I.31.



have always been hypocrites within the church. However, it is important that we acknowledge that the relationship that God bears toward the hypocrite has been revealed in Scripture not as gracious, but as wrathful.

The very ordinances of the church that God intends for the conversion, comfort, and edification of his people, he also intends for the judicial hardening of the hypocrites in the church (Isaiah 6:9-11; Matthew 13:14-16; Luke 8:10; John 12:40; Acts 28:26-27; Romans 11:8; etc.). When Bannerman and others speak of visibility and invisibility as pertaining to the *same church* under different characteristics, we agree with them fully. But when they subsequently treat that agreement as though there *are* two churches that must be distinguished, then we resist their efforts and state emphatically that God has made no gracious covenant with the hypocrite, whether external or otherwise. Rather, the Belgic Confession at Article 29 should be consulted on this point for its clarity of exposition of this important distinction. “But we speak *not* of the company of hypocrites, who are mixed in the Church with the good, yet are not *of* the Church, though externally in it; but we say that the body and communion of the true Church must be distinguished from all sects who call themselves the Church.”<sup>[162]</sup>

Along this line, Stuart R. Jones wrote an informative article in the Spring 1997 issue of the *Westminster Theological Journal*.<sup>[163]</sup> In his article, Jones pointed out that the Reformers, in their various formulations regarding the invisible church, were battling Rome’s insistence that the Nicene formulation was comprehended in the institutional

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162. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983 reprint of 1931), III.419. Emphasis added.

church of Rome. Jones stated, “That marks should be needed to find the church demonstrates an epistemological problem the Reformation faced in attacking the Romanist ecclesiology. Rome, by claiming the four Nicene attributes (unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity) defined in institutional terms, forced the Reformers to refine their understanding of those attributes.<sup>{164}</sup> In rejecting the purely institutional approach of Rome, the Reformers emphasized a less institutionally tangible and visible notion of church attributes. From this conception the formula ‘invisible church’ eventually developed. Such a formula highlighted possible misunderstandings and difficulties that required theological attention. Concerns about this formula and doctrine continue to be voiced today but now by many within the Reformed community.”<sup>{165}</sup>

The *Second Helvetic Confession* of 1566 seems to bear up Jones’ observation:

“And therefore we do not allow of the doctrine of the Romish prelates, who would make the Pope the general pastor and supreme head of the Church Militant here on earth, and the very vicar of Jesus Christ, who has (as they

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163. Stuart R. Jones, “The Invisible Church of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*” in *WTJ* (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1997), 59.1, 71-85. Hereafter *Jones*.

164. See chapter eight below on the Attributes and Marks of the church. These Nicene attributes are not denied by a Protestant understanding, but neither are they limited to an institutional understanding as Rome does.

165. *Jones*, 71.

say) all fullness of power and sovereign authority in the Church. For we hold and teach that Christ our Lord is, and remains still, the only universal pastor, and highest bishop, before God his Father; and that in the Church he performs all the duties of a pastor or bishop, even to the world's end; and therefore stands not in need of any other to supply his room. For he is said to have a substitute, who is absent; but Christ is present with his Church; and is the head that gives life thereunto. He did straitly forbid his apostles and their successors all superiority or dominion in the Church. They, therefore, that by gainsaying set themselves against so manifest a truth, and bring another kind of government into the Church, who sees not that they are to be counted in the number of them of [whom] the apostles of Christ prophesied? as in Peter, 2 Epist. ii.1, and Paul, Acts xx.29; 2 Cor. xi.13; 2 Thess. ii.8,9, and in many other places.”<sup>{166}</sup>

Like Jones, this dissertation is in strong disagreement with some, such as G. VanDooren, who maintain that the idea of the invisible church arises from “pagan philosophy.”<sup>{167}</sup> Rather, the idea of invisibility arises from subsuming the doctrine of the church (ecclesiology) to some extent under the doctrine of salvation (soteriology). The *Scots Confession* of 1560, in article 16, referring to the “ane Kirk” (or “one

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166. Schaff, *op. cit.*, 3.871.

167. G. VanDooren, “About Visibility and Invisibility,” *Clarion* 38/23 (Winnipeg: Premier Printing) November 10, 1989, 493-94. Cited in *Jones*, 73, n8.

church”), stated “quhilk Kirk is catholike, that is, universal, because it containis the Elect of all ages,.... This Kirk is invisible, knawen onelie to God, quha alane knawis whome he hes chosen;....”<sup>{168}</sup> Similarly, the *Irish Articles* of 1615 declared of the “one Catholic Church (out of which there is no salvation)” that it contains the company of all saints who ever were, are, or shall be. Article 68 went on to claim, “And because this Church consisteth of all those, and those alone, which are elected by God unto salvation, and regenerated by the power of his Spirit, the number of whom is known only unto God himself: therefore it is called the *Catholic* or universal, and the *Invisible* Church.”<sup>{169}</sup> The *Second Helvetic Confession*, too (quoted previously above), bases its idea of invisibility *not* in a pagan philosophy, but in its soteriology and view of election. Thus in Chapter XVII that confession stated “Whereupon the Church of God may be termed invisible; not that the men whereof it consists are invisible, but because, being hidden from our sight, and *known only to God*, it cannot be discerned by the judgment of man.”<sup>{170}</sup>

We should note that with a striking unanimity, the Reformed confessions root their doctrine of an invisible church *not* in “pagan philosophy,” but in the eternal mind of God as he has eternally *known* the elect. The *proposition* that God has eternally maintained of the church consisting of all the elect of all ages does have some commonality of terms with the *idealism* of Plato, but it cannot rightly be said that

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168. Schaff, *op. cit.*, 3.458-59.

169. *Ibid.*, Emphasis in original.

170. *Ibid.*, 3.874. Emphasis added.

because two otherwise distinct systems have certain features in common that one must have arisen from the other. Further, those who aver that this idea must be wrong *because* it is similar to Plato's have committed the genetic fallacy at least, and are guilty of an abusive *ad hominem* fallacy at worst.

At its most fundamental level, all theism must be *idealistic* in this sense. According to Christianity, which is that form of theism based upon the Scripture, which Christianity claims to be a revelation of *the mind of Christ*, God is a perfect and uncreated Spirit.<sup>[171]</sup> This Christian idealism maintains, then, that neither mind, nor spirit, nor values have arisen from material things, but are themselves primary; God being *the* Primary. God is creator of everything else that is, including even the elect. But the elect, having been known to God from all eternity, must have existed *as an eternal idea* in the mind of God even before their creation. The Reformed confessions referred to this understanding of the elect as “the invisible church.” We should note, however, that this eternal idea is propositional in nature, and not merely a “naked idea,” such as “elect” or “church.” The replacement of Plato's “ideas” or “forms” with propositions is what distinguishes the Christian idealism of Augustine or Gordon H. Clark from Platonic idealism.

Because the ideal church, or invisible church, does not always manifest itself to the eyes of men, it is called “invisible.” Because there are often hypocrites found among the number of those who truly profess Christ, it cannot be known beyond the visible notes of faithfulness who are truly members and who are not. Many partake of the *out-*

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171. Shorter #4, *Confession*, 287-88. Larger #7, *Confession*, 131-33.

*ward* means of grace and join with the visible professors of Christ, and because of that they are counted *in human judgment* members of the true church. Yet if their profession is false, in the sense of arising from a merely historical or temporary or miraculous faith, the Lord will eventually make that known either in process of time or at the final judgment.

Admittedly, it is *possible* to read the Westminster Confession in such a way as to infer a fundamental difference between the visible church and the invisible church, as though they were distinct and separate entities. Some Presbyterian theologians have read it just that way. Yet, it need not be read in such a way; and the *Westminster Confession of Faith* is far more in line with other Reformed confessions such as the Belgic when such an absolute bifurcation is avoided. Thus one of the proof-texts in Westminster Confession of Faith XXV.1 for the *invisible* church as the body of Christ is Colossians 1:18. Then in the same chapter at article 6 the Confession uses the same proof-text to support the statement that there is no other head of the *visible* church but the Lord Jesus Christ.

In applying the same passage to both the “visible church” and the “invisible church” as well, the Westminster divines imply that there are not two different churches with two different covenants and two different memberships, but one church with varying aspects. Thus the divines were able consistently to apply the same passage to both the visible and the invisible, demonstrating that they believed it to be one and the same church. “And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all *things* he might have the preeminence” (Colossians 1:18). Christ has one body, not two. He is not head of the invisible church without at the same

time being the head of the visible church. These are errors that have swept away many in the past, but are out of keeping with the Westminster Confession of Faith, especially as it is interpreted in light of other Reformed confessions.

Furthermore, in its description of the visible church the Confession maintains that the catholic (universal) visible church has been sometimes more and sometimes less visible.<sup>{172}</sup> But this is a virtually identical statement (semantically equivalent) to the Belgic Confession's statement at Article 27, "And this holy Church is preserved or supported by God against the rage of the whole world; though she sometimes (for a while) *appears* very small, and, in the *eyes of men*, to be reduced to nothing:..."<sup>{173}</sup> The underlined words emphasize the aspect of the visibility of God's church as it may fluctuate in size and purity through history.

Though there is both an internal and external aspect to the covenant of grace that corresponds to the invisible and visible aspects of the church respectively, yet there are not two covenants of grace but one. Further, we would insist that God is *not graciously in covenant*<sup>{174}</sup> with the reprobate. The unconverted are not *true members* of the church. This author does not deny that the unconverted may have hypocritically made a confession of faith. Nor does this dissertation deny that men may have accepted them into the church's fellowship.

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172. WCF XXV.4, *Confession*, 109.

173. Schaff, *op. cit.*, 417. Emphasis added.

174. This statement does not deny that all mankind are under the curse of the covenant as covenant breakers.

Some may even live lives outwardly free of offense and make use outwardly of the sacraments and the other ordinances of God's true church. What this dissertation proposes is that the reprobate *are not and cannot be* true members of the church.

Calvin makes this same distinction between hypocrites who have attached themselves to the church and the true members of the church. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he said of the invisibility of the church, "Sometimes by the term 'church' it [Scripture] means that which is actually in God's presence, into which no persons are received but those who are children of God by grace of adoption and true members of Christ by sanctification of the Holy Spirit."<sup>{175}</sup> Calvin proceeds in the same section of his *Institutes* to speak of the visible aspect of the church because it is strictly in its visible aspect that we can know the true church of God from all ungodly sects.

Calvin claimed of the visible ordinances that identify the church, "Often, however, the name 'church' designates the whole multitude of men spread over the earth who profess to worship one God and Christ. By baptism, we are initiated into faith in him; by partaking in the Lord's Supper, we attest our unity in true doctrine and love; in the Word of the Lord we have agreement, and for the preaching of the Word the ministry instituted by Christ is preserved. In this church are mingled *many hypocrites* who have *nothing of Christ* but the name and *outward appearance*.... Such are tolerated for a time either because they cannot be convicted by a competent tribunal or because a vigorous discipline does not always flourish as it ought."<sup>{176}</sup>

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175. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.7.



Calvin, then, while admitting that there are wicked and hypocrites mixed into the church, also claimed that they do not belong there. They do not have a *right* to be there; rather they are merely tolerated for a season. Thus there may be and likely will be some unconverted within the church's pale, but they are not the church.

Calvin proceeded in his next section of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* to speak of what we may call the *notae fidelium* before speaking of the *notae ecclesiae*. The Battles edition of Calvin's *Institutes* gave this section the title, "The limitation of our judgment." It has been suggested by the Calvin scholar Wilhelm Neuser, however, that a more appropriate title would be "The Characteristics of the Faithful" (*notae fidelium*). For Calvin it is impossible to speak of the true church as an abstraction apart from its members.<sup>[177]</sup> Calvin reminded us, "For he [God alone] knows and has marked those who know neither him nor themselves. Of those who openly wear his badge, his eyes alone see the ones who are unfeignedly holy and will persevere to the very end [Matthew 24:13] — the ultimate point of salvation."<sup>[178]</sup> That is to say, we cannot know with the absolute certainty that God knows who are his and who are not; who are merely *in* the church and who are truly members *of* it. Calvin began in the cited

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176. *Ibid.*, Emphasis added.

177. Wilhelm Neuser, "Calvin's Teaching on the *notae fidelium*: An Unnoticed Part of the *Institutio* 4.1.8," trans. Mark S. Burrows in *Probing the Reformed Tradition: Historical Studies in Honor of Edward A. Dowey, Jr.*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 79-95.

178. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.8

section to address the aspect of the visibility of the church. He thus proceeded in the section to give visible traits of true members of the church; the truly faithful.

“But on the other hand, because he foresaw it to be of some value for us to know who were to be counted as his children, he has in this regard accommodated himself to our capacity. And, since assurance of faith was not necessary, he *substituted* for it a certain charitable judgment whereby we recognize as members of the church those who, by confession of faith, by example of life, and by partaking of the sacraments, profess the same God and Christ with us.”<sup>{179}</sup>

The elect, then, do not remain unrecognizable in any *permanent* sense. At some point in their lives, their faith becomes evident by a confession of it, a life in accord with it, and a joining with the true church. Thus true Christians do not *remain* invisible to the eyes of men. As Neuser points out, “Calvin does not, of course, wish to say that election and the *notae fidelium* stand in an unwavering correlation, since he admits that there are also those bearing God’s public ‘badge’ who are hypocrites. But he does insist that election and the ‘life of faith’ are indissoluble.”<sup>{180}</sup>

Neither Calvin nor the Belgic Confession, nor the Westminster Confession strictly understood, make mention of an invisible church that would consist of none but true believers distinct and separate from a visible church made up of believers and *unbelievers as such*. Rather our reformed heritage speaks of a church that is more or less

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179. *Ibid.*

180. Neuser, *op. cit.*, 85.

visible even though hypocrites may be found in it. We must note carefully that our Larger Catechism affirms that “The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed.”<sup>[181]</sup> There is no hint of a gracious covenant with hypocrites considered *as such*. The reprobate have never been partakers in the covenant of grace in either the Old Testament or the New Testament.

Additionally this dissertation should note that all true members of the church are entitled to the use of the sacraments, by which the benefits of Christ and the new covenant are sealed to them.<sup>[182]</sup> However, no benefits of the covenant are or can be sealed to the unregenerate in the Lord’s Supper. The bread and wine are the communion of the body and blood of Christ (cf. Romans 4:11; First Corinthians 10:16; Matthew 26:26-28). But because hypocrites have neither part nor lot in the benefits that are sealed in the sacraments, they eat and drink judgment to themselves should they attend upon the Lord’s Table.

Moreover, the very essence of the church as it gathers is union with Christ by the Holy Spirit. “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body...and have been made all to drink into one Spirit” (First Corinthians 12:13). Hypocrites, however, do not have the Spirit. “These be...sensual, having not the Spirit” (Jude 19). Since hypocrites do not have the Spirit, they are none of his (Romans 8:9). Thus they cannot be true members of the church because her members are Christ’s body.

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181. Larger #31, *Confession*, 142.

182. Shorter #92, *Confession*, 313.

The various figures that are used in Scripture for the church have in large measure no applicability to hypocrites. The church is called the house of God (First Timothy 3:15); built of living stones (First Peter 2:5); the fold of Christ (John 10:16); the kingdom of his dear Son (Colossians 1:13); the congregation of saints (Psalm 89:5); the assembly of the upright (Psalm 111:1); etc. Writing to visible churches, Paul called them those “that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints” (First Corinthians 1:2), and the author of Hebrews speaks of those he addressed as “holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling” (Hebrews 3:1). But none of these appellations are true of the unconverted as such and could never be true of the reprobate in any sense. Therefore the reprobate — even those within the church’s pale — are not and cannot be true members of the church of Christ.

Finally, this idea of the reprobate being *in* the church but not *of* the church is manifest in First John 2:19, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us.” Those who “went out” were the reprobate hypocrites who prior to their leaving had been *in* the church but nevertheless did not belong to the church. Thus unconverted reprobates can be in the church and attached physically to the church, but so long as they are unconverted they are not *of* the church and are therefore not truly members of it.

For a right understanding of the invisible/visible aspects of the church, it is important for us to remember that the church herself is an outworking of the pattern in the heavens. When we speak of the church as the outworking historically of the pattern in the heavens we mean, in part, that God has eternally known the exact membership of the church. Shorter Catechism #20 states correctly, “God having, out

of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected *some* to eternal life, did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver *them* out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring *them* into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer.”<sup>{183}</sup> Speaking also of God’s eternal decree the Westminster standards declare together with Second Timothy 2:19 that “These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.”<sup>{184}</sup>

The ideal church thus exists eternally in the mind of God. The historical outworking of the ideal is found in the effectual calling, justification, conversion, adoption, sanctification, and final glorification of the elect. In the context of that historical outworking, God has decreed to use church ordinances to bring about the calling, faith, repentance, perseverance, and glorification of those who are parts or members of his ideal church. As those ordinances are visible and evident in history, the church is made visible and manifest to the eyes of men. Nevertheless, it is incorrect to suppose that because certain wicked hypocrites attach themselves to the historical outworking of the ideal church that they are therefore truly members of it. Such hypocrites are no more true members of God’s church than barnacles are part of a ship’s hull.

So then, the church on earth — this one catholic church — manifests itself sometimes more openly in her public confessions, her public assemblies, her public separation, her public ordinances, etc. In

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183. Shorter #20, *Confession*, 291. [emphasis added]

184. WCF III.4, *Confession*, 29.

doing so, this one church on earth is called “the visible church.” At other times this same catholic church is more hidden from the eyes of men by prevailing errors, by the scattering resulting from persecution or other trials, by worldliness and worldly methods, by ungodliness, by impure or idolatrous worship, etc. In such cases, she is referred to as being *less visible* as the church in the wilderness (Revelation 12:14 cf. verse 6).<sup>{185}</sup>

Because the visibility of the church is not an aspect by which the church should be defined, but an aspect that the church has to a greater or lesser extent, the Confession of Faith makes the statement that visibility as it applies to the church is scalar. “This catholick church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them.”<sup>{186}</sup>

Even in the outward and visible sacraments of the church, the Westminster Confession of Faith distinguishes sometimes more implicitly and sometimes more explicitly between true believers, true members of the church, true converts; and those who wickedly and hypocritically attach themselves to the church by false professions. Thus at the chapter “Of the Sacraments” in the Westminster Confession we read that the efficacy of a sacrament depends entirely upon

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185. WCF XXV.4, *Confession*, 109 & Second Helvetic Confession XVII cited in Schaff, *op. cit.*, 3.874.

186. WCF XXV.4, *Confession*, 109.

the work of the Holy Spirit as he sovereignly confers upon the elect that which is signified in the sacraments.<sup>{187}</sup> Regarding the sacraments in particular the Confession uses similar language. In the chapter “Of the Lord’s Supper,” the Westminster document asserts that the Lord’s Supper is “to be observed *in his church* unto the end of the world, for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of himself in his death, thus sealing all benefits thereof *unto true believers*...as members of his mystical body.”<sup>{188}</sup>

Some may object that Christ’s “mystical body” in this context must refer to the invisible church. The difficulty with such an objection is that it seemingly ignores the fact that the sacraments are a part of the aspect of *visibility*, not a part of the aspect of *invisibility*; yet the *efficacy* of the sacraments belongs to the aspect of invisibility. “Unto this catholick *visible* church Christ hath given the ministry, oracles, and ordinances of God,...and doth by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto.”<sup>{189}</sup>

Not only is this efficacy spoken of in the Confession in general terms, the Confession ties it also to the visible ordinances and sacraments. Thus regarding baptism, our standards teach “the *efficacy* of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, *to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace*

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187. “a promise of benefit to worthy receivers,” WCF XXVII.3, *Confession*, 113.

188. WCF XXIX.1, *Confession*, p. 117.

189. WCF XXV.3, *Confession*, 108.

*belongeth unto*, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time."<sup>{190}</sup> Thus the outward and visible element is given to all those born *within* the church. But the *efficacy* of the sacrament (i.e. the actual grace sealed and signified by the sacrament) belongs *only* to the true members of God's ideal (i.e. "according to the counsel of God's own will") church.

But are there not many wicked who receive the outward and visible sign and are thus made members of the visible church who never truly know the grace signified by the sacraments? Yes, many wicked persons receive the sacraments outwardly in their visible elements; yes, many of those same wicked persons never truly know the grace signified by the sacraments; no, those wicked persons are never made true members of the church, but rather receive the greater condemnation for having wickedly partaken of that which was intended only for the children of the kingdom. "Although ignorant and wicked men receive the outward elements in this sacrament [of the Lord's Supper]; yet they receive not the thing signified thereby;..."<sup>{191}</sup>

Thus, to clarify finally the distinction between the visible and invisible aspects of the church, this dissertation maintains that the true catholic (universal) church can be regarded in her internal frame which is altogether spiritual and invisible to the eye of man or she can be regarded in her external frame in her public assemblies and ordinances. Her spiritual frame consists in faith, union with Christ, spiritual life, etc., none of which can be observed with the physical eye and

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190. WCF XXVIII.6, *Confession*, 116.

191. WCF XXIX.8, *Confession*, 119.



none of which belong to the reprobate. The gatherings in which God's word is preached and heard, the sacraments administered, and other ordinances practiced are public and visible to the human eye. But clearly one and the same person is invisible respecting his soul, will, affections, intellect, etc. and at the same time visible respecting his body and motions. He is not two persons, but one. Just as a person cannot be properly divided into two persons because he has a visible and an invisible aspect, neither can the one true church of God properly be made into two churches because it has a visible aspect and an invisible one.

### ***Objections Considered***

Those who hold to an absolute bifurcation between the visible and the invisible or treat the distinction as though they held to such a dichotomy may raise certain objections. It will only strengthen and enlarge our understanding to anticipate and consider such objections. First, it might be pointed out that we have already acknowledged that there is an internal and external calling, an internal and external faith, an internal and external holiness, and an internal and external participation in covenant privileges. Consequently, the objection might go, there must be two churches: one internal and invisible; the other visible and external.

This conclusion would no more follow than it would follow that a householder has two families because there are strangers trespassing upon his property, perhaps even making the *claim* that they are members of his family. The Scripture nowhere commends a lying or hypocritical profession of faith. Much rather, Scripture regards such hypocrites as interlopers. The fact that reprobates can feign an out-

ward obedience while remaining destitute of any inward grace hardly makes them a part of the true church. Should it become known that one had hypocritically joined himself to the church apart from true faith and repentance the church would be obliged to say to that one as Peter said to Simon Magus, “Thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee” (Acts 8:21-22).

Should one have *only* the external call, temporal faith, external holiness, and a perfunctory participation in external privileges and meanwhile lack the internal and spiritual realities to which those things point, then he is yet in his sins and “has no part nor lot in this matter,” just as Simon Magus.

Another objection that this dissertation might wish to consider is more along the line of a seeming clarification or modification of the original idea of two churches. One might claim that he is speaking not of two churches, but merely of a twofold perspective of one and the same church. This was basically the claim of J. Bannerman cited earlier in the dissertation in which he stated, “when we speak of the Church invisible and the Church visible, we are not to be understood as if we referred in these designations to two separate and distinct Churches, but rather to the same Church under two different characters.”<sup>{192}</sup> All well if it is true.

Yet if one maintains that the invisible church has a different membership from the visible church then he is proposing two churches. If

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192. J. Bannerman, *op. cit.*, I.29.

one maintains that there are different manners of being united to the visible church and the invisible church, then he is proposing two churches. If there are two types of members who are essentially different in their qualifications for membership or if there are two different ways of becoming a member of the visible church and the invisible church, then there are two essentially different churches. The external relationship is not what *makes* one a member of the church nor can it constitute an external church or visible church distinct from or separate from the internal and invisible church. Further, no merely external relationship can give the reprobate a *right* to the use of the sacraments. Thus the *ecclesia permixta* does not constitute a distinct church or separate church as an external church separate from or as opposed to the church of the elect. In fact, not only do the reprobate not have a right to the use of the sealing ordinances, their wrong use of them results in a further hardening and condemnation (First Corinthians 11:27-34).

Yet the true members of Christ's church have a *right* to the use of the sacraments because they have what the sacraments signify and seal. Finally, if one understands the differentiation or distinction between the external and internal aspects of the visible and invisible aspects of the church to be only a twofold perspective of one and the same church and does not hold to two churches or two memberships or two qualifications for membership, then all is well. There is no disagreement and objections are then superfluous. The church can be viewed in reference to her internal spiritual status in which event we speak of the invisible aspect of the church. Alternatively, the church can be viewed in reference to her external manifestations in the world. In that event, we speak of the visible aspect(s) of the church. Thus, we speak in both instances of a church whose true members are the elect

of God. There may be those who deceive us into thinking that they are members *because we are deceived into thinking that they are believers*. It is only to the extent that we wrongly regard the unbeliever to be a believer that we are deceived into thinking he is a true member of the true church of Christ. Should we learn that such an one is in reality an unbeliever, then it would become our responsibility according to our place and station to declare to him, “thou hast neither part nor lot with us in this matter.”

But the point of unbelievers deceptively remaining in the church brings us to our next objection. It is obvious that there are many unconverted persons who associate with the church, who are accepted as members based upon a profession of faith, who continue as members, and who even partake of the sacraments. Therefore, they must be true members of the external or visible church.

This dissertation, however, denies the conclusion. It is the position of this dissertation that the unconverted, though they are *in* the church are not *of* the church and therefore cannot be true members of the church (First John 2:19). It is one thing to associate with the church and to be accepted by the fallible judgment of man to be members and it is another thing *altogether* to be truly members in the sight of God. The latter does not and cannot proceed from the former, for the very reason given. Other men, who can judge only by appearance and whose judgment is therefore fallible, perform the acceptance of men as members of the church.<sup>{193}</sup> Men cannot know the minds of others directly, so the judgment of the heart must be left to God. The probability of regeneration is not the rule by which the elders of the church accept members. Rather the elders judge strictly by the rule of a confession of the truth and the response in a person’s life to the truth

of their confession — by the outworking of a life that does not contradict their confession.

It is one thing to join the church — to attach oneself to the church — externally. It is another thing to speak of an external church distinct from the internal church. Even though false professors may be externally in the church, it does not follow from that fact that there is a separate external church of which they are *bona fide* members. The desire of the hypocrite is not simply to become a member of an external church in which some part of the membership has eternal life. Rather, his objective is to be a member of a church in which the membership, as a whole, will be saved. They apply themselves to this church, outside which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation, because they want the salvation that appertains to that church. But they apply themselves to it in an external or perfunctory way and not as speaking the truth from a truly converted heart. They therefore cannot be true members, though men may regard them as such. They are within the church as a sort of poisonous fruit or as trespassers and interlopers on territory not properly their own. They are present in the kingdom of Christ not as true citizens of Zion but as traitors and seditious persons.

A further objection may arise from the fact that even reprobate ministers can administer the sacraments and other ordinances of worship without the ordinances being thus defiled by the reprobate minis-

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193. Such judgment depends upon an inductive argument based upon “evidences.” This makes the judgment subject to the inductive fallacy at best and bases it upon the testimony of a liar at worst. Such judgments must always be regarded therefore as provisional and fallible and never as determinative.

ter. The Westminster Shorter Catechism rightly teaches, “The sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that doth administer them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them.” It is not by the intention or piety or even election of the minister that the sacrament is effectual. Some might argue from this correct statement that the reprobate minister who thus administers the sacrament must be a member of the visible church (though of course, not a member of the invisible church), thus seemingly establishing the existence of a separate membership between the visible and invisible church(es). Such an objection might even point to John 11:49-53. Caiaphas was high priest, obviously an officer in the visible church. Due to his office, he prophesied a true prophecy: “Jesus should die for that nation.” But, it is also clear from Scripture that Caiaphas was at the least unconverted and more likely reprobate. So it seems, according to this objection, that there are not only reprobate members of the church of Christ, but even reprobate officers of a true church. Given that the set of officers of the church is a subset of the set of members of the church, it follows that there exist reprobate members of the church.

First, while it must be admitted that the sacred power of the sacraments does not derive from the person or intention of the minister, neither does the power derive from his conversion, election, or office as such. Therefore this dissertation asserts along with the catechism that the sacraments become effectual means of salvation “only by the blessing of Christ and the working of his Spirit in them that by faith receive them.” It is certainly agreed that the sacraments ought only to be administered by one properly ordained by the church. However, the power or benefit of the sacrament does not depend upon the salvation

of the one administering it any more than it depends upon his intention or piety. The Westminster standards properly deny the Papist error that claims a Protestant cannot properly administer the sacraments because he does not properly intend them for sacramental regeneration. However, they do not thereby make the reprobate into members of the church of Christ.

Adducing Caiaphas' prophecy is a dangerous matter, in this author's opinion. First, the visible church was quite low in visibility at the time of Caiaphas' prophecy. Second, the sense in which Caiaphas intended the prophecy was altogether the opposite of what God was actually doing. The prophetic utterance of Caiaphas was no more the preceptive will of God than was it the preceptive will of God for Joseph's brothers to sell him into slavery. However, the people of God are so far from being under obligation to obey false prophecies, that they are warned in fact *not* to heed them (Jeremiah 23:32; Matthew 7:15; 24:24; Mark 13:22-23; Second Peter 2:1-2; First John 4:1). It is not simply that their prophecies are false — they are themselves false prophets and teachers. But the people of God are required to submit to those who are true officers in Christ's true church (Hebrews 13:7, 17; First Thessalonians 5:12-13; First Timothy 3:5; Proverbs 5:11-14; First Timothy 5:17; First Corinthians 16:16; etc.). It follows, then, that since the people are forbidden to follow false prophets, but are required to follow those that God has placed over them, that God has not placed false teachers over the people of God and that those false teachers cannot be true officers in the church of Christ.

Another objection arises from the use of parallels, parables, and illustrations in Scripture. This dissertation shall attempt to explain

three such in order to give proper perspective on explaining all similar objections.

1. On a threshing floor, both wheat and chaff can be found together. The threshing floor is the church and the chaff and wheat both bear the same relationship to the threshing floor. Similarly, the converted and the unconverted together belong to the same (external or visible) church.

This dissertation in no way disagrees that both good and evil men are found together in the church just as the wheat and chaff are found together on the threshing floor. However, to follow the analogy, this dissertation proposes that the chaff is not truly a “member” of the threshing floor notwithstanding its presence *in* the threshing floor. Chaff is present as chaff on the threshing floor only so long as it takes time to discard it. It is only as the chaff is inseparable from the wheat that it has found its way onto the threshing floor in the first place. When the threshing is complete, and the chaff is exposed as the chaff it is, it will not be kept in the garner. All who are *in* the church are not therefore *of* the church. When the chaff is identified as chaff it is cast to the wind. So likewise when the unconverted are *shown* to be unconverted, they are cast out of the church.

2. In Matthew 13:24-25, & 47 both wheat and tares are found in the same field and the same dragnet drew both good and bad fish. Therefore, both the good and the evil are equally members of the visible church.

First, it should be noted that the field in the parable of the tares of the field does not represent the church (Matthew 13:38). The field in the parable of the tares of the field represents the world. It is not even the purpose of this parable to teach anything about the nature or



makeup of the church. However, even if it could be established that there is some sort of analogy with the church,<sup>{194}</sup> the most that could be said is that the tares do not really *belong* in the field or to the field and it is only *for the sake of the wheat* that the tares are tolerated for a short season in the field. One cannot establish from this parable that the tares are true members of the field. Likewise, the dragnet gathers all sorts of fish, but the fishermen then *examine* the fish. Only the good fish (the true believers by way of analogy) are put into the vessels to be kept. The parables are not intended to teach us the nature of the church and it would be dangerous exegesis to attempt to use them in that fashion. The parables are intended to illustrate for us the final disposition of the good and the evil.

Yet even by way of analogy we dare not go farther than Calvin who wisely informed us, “as soon as Christ has gathered a small flock for himself, many hypocrites mingle with it, persons of immoral lives creep in, nay, many wicked men insinuate themselves; in consequence of which, numerous stains pollute his holy assembly, which Christ has separated for himself.... In my opinion, the design of the parable is simply this: So long as the pilgrimage of the Church in this world continues, bad men and hypocrites will mingle in it with those who are good and upright, that the children of God may be armed with patience, and, in the midst of offenses which are fitted to disturb them, may preserve unbroken steadfastness [sic] of faith...and though Christ afterward adds that *the field is the world*, yet he undoubtedly intended

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194. Augustine, in his homilies on Matthew 13 makes such an analogy by pointing out that even in church office it is possible to find both wheat and chaff. *NPNF*, First Series, VI.334-35.

to apply this designation, in a peculiar manner, to the church, about which he had commenced the discourse.”<sup>{195}</sup> Significantly, Calvin even in making application to the church, did not claim that the tares in the parable were members of the church. Rather he regarded them to be hypocrites who *mingle in*, immoral persons who *creep in*, and wicked men who *insinuate themselves*. He nowhere regarded them as *bona fide* members of God’s true church, but as blemishes, stains, pollutions, and disturbances. It is *from* such as these that Calvin desired to distinguish the true church in his *Institutes*.<sup>{196}</sup>

3. A similar objection might be formulated from Second Timothy 2:20, “in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour.” The house, it may be objected, is the church and the vessels are the members of the church. Among those members of the church there are both the converted who are referred to as vessels of honor, or of silver and gold and the unconverted as well, who are called vessels of dishonor or of wood and earth.

Let us first note that this objection assumes what it should prove; viz., that the vessels of dishonor in the passage are *bona fide* members of the church. The previous verse to this one proclaimed clearly, “the Lord knoweth them that are his.” But this objection would have us to understand “the Lord knoweth them that are his and them that are not his at the same time and in the same way.” This dissertation would answer this objection first by pointing out the strangeness of the exe-

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195. Calvin, *Commentaries: A Harmony of the Gospels, in loco*.

196. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.7-8.

genesis required to arrive at the objection. The seal upon the foundation is “The Lord knoweth them that are his.” But this objection would have the seal to be “The Lord knoweth not only them that are his, but them that are not his as well.” The word “know” in Scripture quite often has the connotation, as it does in this passage, not of a bare knowledge, but of an intimate knowledge, or even a loving knowledge.<sup>{197}</sup> Calvin, after pointing out the similarity between this passage in Second Timothy and First John 2:19 — “let us instantly call to remembrance what we are taught by the Apostle John, they ‘they who went out from us were not of us’(1 John ii.19).” — proceeded to comment on verse 20, “When we see some who, for a time, made a *show* of distinguished piety and zeal, fall back shamefully, so far from being troubled on account of it, we ought rather to acknowledge that this arrangement is seemly and adapted to the providence of God.... The Apostle enjoins that men who desire to consecrate themselves to the Lord cleanse themselves from the pollution of wicked men;...”<sup>{198}</sup> This again seems to tie itself to Calvin’s understanding of the *notae fidelium*: “because [God] foresaw it to be of some value for us to know who were to be counted as his children, he has in this regard accommodated himself to our capacity.”<sup>{199}</sup>

In short, the vessels of dishonor — the reprobate — cannot be shown from this place to be members of the church. One should not become *overly* concerned about the minute details of such a passage.

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197. As at Genesis 4:1, 17, 25; Amos 3:2; Nahum 1:7; Psalm 1:6; etc.

198. Calvin, *Commentaries*, *in loco*.

199. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.8.

Rather we should carefully note the objective of the passage which is to demonstrate that although the good may not be able to do anything immediately about the presence of wicked men in the church, yet the Lord knows who is and who is not in the church by right (*de jure*). Not one word in the whole passage indicates that the vessels of dishonor are true members of the church. As Calvin himself noted, even if they are mingled in, they are not truly of the church.

Yet another objection that might be raised at this point would be to compare the position of this dissertation to that of separatists, Anabaptists, and others who hold to a doctrine of a pure church on earth. The objection then would become that if one were to maintain that only the converted are true members of the church, then one is by that position proposing that there either is or may be a pure church upon earth. But Scripture denies the existence or possibility of such a church on earth. Therefore, by denying the consequent one denies also the antecedent, which was that only the converted are true members of the church.

Though this objection may seem to have much logical force, it is sound only if the premises are true. However, the major premise depends upon a “straw man” assertion. Claiming that the church has only converted or true believers as members is *not* the semantic equivalent of asserting that the church on earth would then be pure. First, even those who are truly converted are never fully sanctified in this life. Larger Catechism #149 correctly relieves us of any false presumptions in that regard. “No man is able, either of himself, or by any grace received in this life, perfectly to keep the commandments of God; but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed.”<sup>{200}</sup> So even if there were no hypocrites mingled in the church, there is a suf-

ficient amount of abiding sin remaining in true believers to prevent a pure church on earth.

Additionally, however, it should be noted that by asserting that only true believers are *bona fide* members of the church this dissertation has not asserted that there would be no unconverted in the congregation of the Lord. The denial is simply that the unconverted are not present as true members. There never has been a church upon earth in which no unconverted can be found. In fact, it has been the case at certain times and places that the unconverted have perhaps outnumbered the true members. But the distinction made by the Apostle in First John 2:19 must be maintained. The unconverted are not *of* the church, though they may be for a season *in* the church.

The final objection to consider is that this view of the church makes it unrecognizable. If only the converted are truly members of the church and if one can never be certain about the conversion of others, then one can never identify the church with any certainty.

First, it is readily agreed that we can never have an absolute certainty about the conversion of others. Even some who have attached themselves to the church for many years may turn out in the end to be hypocrites. But that concession is not at all the same thing as the assertion that no indications of the presence of true faith exist at all. It is true, as both Augustine and Calvin have demonstrated, that there are “many sheep without and many wolves within.”<sup>[201]</sup> Yet Calvin proceeded even in that context to explain that because absolute certainty

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200. Larger #149, *Confession*, 237-38.

201. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.8; Augustine, *NPNF*, First Series, VII.253.

in such things is not possible (what he called assurance in this context), God has substituted charitable judgment that allows or requires elders to recognize as members of the church: “those who by confession of faith, by example of life, and by partaking of the sacraments, profess the same God and Christ with us.”<sup>{202}</sup>

Second, however, it is necessary to remember that we do not identify the church by the regeneration of its members, but by true doctrine and the apparent sanctification of its professing members. Though regeneration is not identifiable (and thus belonging to the invisible aspect of the church), yet profession of faith and separation from the world are identifiable and wherever these are present there also is the true church on earth. While it is an acknowledged fact that many may possess these two *notae* in pretense rather than in truth, it remains that the truth or pretense of a confession is a personal, invisible matter and not a public, visible matter. Thus our understanding of the true church does not make it impossible to find, for it is in existence in our charitable judgment wherever the true faith is professed, even though there may be many hypocrites who have intruded themselves upon it.

In conclusion, while admitting the usefulness of distinguishing between the visible and invisible aspects of the church, this dissertation denies that there are two churches with two purposes, two memberships, two qualifications, or two covenants. Hypocrites can and do attach themselves to the church, but they cannot become proper members of it. The assertion that the reprobate can enjoy *true* membership in “the visible church” is to imply that there are two churches: the

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202. Calvin, *Ibid.*

*ecclesia immaculata* and the *ecclesia permixta*. Rather this dissertation finds itself in full agreement with John Murray's statement, "it is not proper to speak of the 'visible church.' According to Scripture we should speak of 'the church' and conceive of it as that visible entity that exists and functions in accord with the institution of Christ as its head, the church that is the body of Christ indwelt and directed by the Holy Spirit, consisting of those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints, manifested in the congregations of the faithful, and finally the church glorious, holy and without blemish."<sup>203</sup>

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203. *Murray*, I.236.

## 6. ATTRIBUTES AND MARKS

### *THE NICENE ATTRIBUTES*

Orthodox Christians since the time of the writing of the Nicene Creed, or more accurately the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, have confessed to believing “the one holy catholic and apostolic church.”<sup>{204}</sup> These four characteristics of the church as “one” (unity), “holy,” “catholic,” and “apostolic” have been understood by all three major branches of the Christian church (Eastern, Roman, and Protestant) as having abiding definitional value. However, there is a significant difference between them as to how these attributes are to be understood and in what sense they should be applied to “the church.”

As Stuart Jones pointed out in his article cited in chapter five of this dissertation, much of the animus for the common reformation distinction between the visible and invisible church arose from a desire to explain the Nicene attributes in terms of the *seeming* defection that was the Protestant Reformation.<sup>{205}</sup> Turretin thus simply ignored the question of indefectibility and unity of the visible church, preferring it seems to regard these attributes as wholly belonging to the church as it is known only to God (i.e. the invisible church).<sup>{206}</sup> The chief difficulty with regarding the four Nicene attributes as pertaining to the

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204. Schaff, *Creeds*, I.28.

205. *Jones*, 71.

206. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, George M. Giger Trans. (Grand Rapids: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997), 3.27.



organizational church is that it leads almost directly to a sacerdotal view of the church and its ministry. Professor Reymond astutely observed, “Because this movement [of the early church leaders] tended to concentrate on the outward characteristics of the church, the church rather quickly began to be viewed as an external institution ruled by a bishop who was a direct successor of the apostles, and who accordingly would be (it was presumed) in possession of the true apostolic tradition.... The unity of the church was thus based upon the unity of the bishops.”<sup>{207}</sup> Reymond went on, however, to assert correctly that when these four attributes are understood biblically rather than in a sacerdotal and institutional sense, that they are proper descriptions of Christ’s church.<sup>{208}</sup>

### *The Unity of the Church*

First, it must be stated at the outset that no system of governing the visible church except for the true and biblical form of Presbyterian Minimalism does full justice to both the unity and diversity of Christ’s church. The church of course is one in virtue of its union with Christ and not because of its government, organization, or external institutions. However, just as prelacy and popery in particular do not properly reflect the diversity and plurality of the church, neither does Independence or Separatism reflect the unity of the church. It is only in following the biblical prescription for church polity that it is possible to measure the church both in terms of its unity *and* its plurality; as it is both one *and* many; as it is both universal *and* local. It is hoped

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207. Reymond, *op. cit.*, 838. Also citing Berkhof, 558.

208. *Ibid.*, 839.

that much of the reflection of both the unity and diversity of the church, as both attributes are manifested in the polity of the church, will be seen in the projected second volume of this work. More will be said below in the chapter on the Local Congregation and Eldership as well as the chapter on Presbyterian Minimalism. The actual outworking of this unity and diversity in church polity will be taken up in the projected second volume however, where this author will deal with the actual *form* of Constitutional Presbyterianism.

Oneness or unity of the church does not refer to location. The church is not limited or bound to a single place. Neither is the unity of the church bound to any other single manifestation. As Wilhelmus à Brakel correctly observed, the church's "oneness does not relate to her external manifestation in the world, for she is like the moon which increases and decreases. Sometimes she manifests herself with more luster than at other times; sometimes she is more dispersed, and other times occupies much less territory. The church is one, however, in *nature and essence*, being identical at all times and in all places, wherever that may be."<sup>[209]</sup> As Paul the apostle instructed the Ephesian saints, "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Ephesians 4:4-6). The unity of the church is manifested when she assembles to hear the true word of God preached faithfully and in her right use of the Christian sacraments. In her discipline the church is also manifested as one when she separates herself from false doctrine and false living.<sup>[210]</sup>

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209. À Brakel, *op. cit.*, 2.ch24, etext courtesy (Simpsonville, SC: Christian Classics Foundation, 1997).

The unity of the church neither necessitates organizational unity, nor is true biblical unity exhausted by organizational unity. Further, a genuine and unhyprocritical unity cannot be accomplished by the wit and wisdom of men. As Thomas M’Crie pointed out,

“Consider the Church, again, in its more specific form, as a society consisting of men called out of the world lying in wickedness; and it will be still more evident that oneness is its attribute. It is founded on supernatural revelation — on the promise of a Saviour, and a divinely instituted worship. By their profession of faith in the former, and their observance of the latter, ‘the sons of God’ were united in the patriarchal age....”<sup>{211}</sup>

Though there is a great variety of churches throughout the world — some more pure than others — these churches, if they are true churches of Christ<sup>{212}</sup> are united to one another by their distinctive character as Christian churches, so long as they retain the *sine qua non* of the true gospel of Jesus Christ. The unity of the church consists of at least five particulars.

First, the unity of the church consists in her having but one Head and Lord. The Father has appointed Jesus Christ as Son and Heir over the whole household of faith. All Christianity that in any way deserves the name must be in professed subjection to King Jesus. He alone is

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210. See the section below on the Marks of the Church.

211. M’Crie, *op. cit.*, 10.

212. See a later section in this chapter for the marks of a true church.

the chief Shepherd of the flock, the only universal Pastor, and sole Head of the church. To allow that there is or could be a temporal head of the church, whether pope or king; or to view any man as determiner or dictator of the faith is to commit high treason against the sole Head of the church and the chief Architect of her unity. Any supposed church not built upon the Rock of Christ alone is no church of his and has no part in the oneness or unity of the true church of Christ.

Second, the church is one because there is but one faith. The “one faith” of the Christian church is a single system of truth. Scripture does not hold forth numerous faiths or contradictory duties. Rather, when a church properly embraces the one system of truth taught in Scripture, she simultaneously separates herself from all human societies that reject the faith and joins herself to all other churches that likewise profess the true faith. Through history and even in any given generation, the church may be called upon to defend and confess a particular doctrine from Scripture. The church is called to be faithful at the point of attack. When Christian societies draw back from this duty or even deny articles of the Christian faith they have deserted the unity of the church.<sup>{213}</sup>

Because the faith is one, then (Ephesians 4:5), the church must be one. From the earliest days, even before Nicea, the church “fathers” understood this fact.

“The Church, though dispersed throughout the whole world, even to the ends of the earth, has received from the apostles and their disciples this faith: [She believes] in

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213. M’Crie, *op. cit.*, 22.

one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit;.... [T]he Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points [of doctrine] just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth.”<sup>{214}</sup>

Third, there is but a single baptism. Baptism is a solemn sign of the New Covenant. More than that, however, the fact that the church has but one baptism is a synecdoche for a single fellowship in all the acts of true worship. All the baptized are made one in Christ as the Holy Spirit makes the ordinance effectual to the elect. By baptism, the initiatory rite of discipleship, the foundation is laid for all acts of worship, fellowship, and discipleship. By the joint celebration of the sacraments, the communion of the saints is both demonstrated and maintained (First Corinthians 10:17; 12:13).<sup>{215}</sup>

Neither is it necessary to the communion of the saints that Christians should all meet for worship at the same place, nor is it necessary that they all belong to the same organized denomination. We should not conceive of the church’s worship and communion as merely local

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214. Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” *ANF*, I.330-31.

215. M’Crie, *op. cit.*, 23.

or organizational, because the communion consists of performing the same acts of worship for the same reasons wherever the church assembles.<sup>[216]</sup> Christians should be ready to embrace all opportunities to join with those “who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ, the Lord, both theirs and ours” (First Corinthians 1:2). This biblical unity should call us to worship God only as he has instituted in his Word. It is only as we add the doctrines and commandments of men (Matthew 15:9) to the pure worship of Christ that we deny and even undermine the biblical unity of the church. It is not by allowing every conceivable practice in our worship that we maintain unity. Rather, as M’Crie stated regarding the unity and uniformity of worship, “Thus it was, as we have seen, in the primitive church; and thus it would still be, if catholic unity were preserved, and if the institutions of Christ, along with the faith to which they relate, were every where preserved pure and entire.”<sup>[217]</sup> As a recognition of this unity of baptism, the church does not require people to be rebaptized when they move from location to location. The baptism administered in one city is the same baptism administered in every city.

Fourth, the church is one with respect to external government and discipline. Christ “gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;...till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11, 13). The exercise of some government and discipline is necessary to the unity of any society. Every family, every nation,

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216. *Ibid.*

217. *Ibid.*

every true community under heaven have some government. Therefore, no good reason can be given for thinking that the church of Christ should be the only society not united in such a way. “If every family has its economy and discipline, if every kingdom has its form of government and laws, shall we suppose that the most perfect of all societies, ‘the house of the living God,’ and ‘the kingdom of heaven,’ should be left by the divine Head without that which so evidently tends to the maintenance of her faith, the purity and regularity of her administrations, and the order, subordination, unity, and peace which ought to reign among all her members?”<sup>[218]</sup>

It is important to notice on this subject that some of the greatest clamor for a so-called “unity” has come from those who want to impose a unity of government and discipline quite apart from a unity of faith. Significantly it is often those with the *least* commitment to the Reformed faith who are the *most* outspoken in favor of ecumenical schemes. At this point it must be asserted unequivocally that institutional unity is so far from being a substitute for the unity of the faith, that there may be times when separation becomes necessary in order to maintain the unity of the faith. Professor Hoeksema might again be consulted in this regard. “...the unity of the church is in no sense the work of man. It cannot be established by man. It is not maintained or continued by man. Nor can it ever be destroyed by man.”<sup>[219]</sup> Hoeksema went on to observe:

“Many there are in our day who find the cause of all

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218. *Ibid.*, 24.

219. Hoeksema, *op. cit.*, 604.

the dissension and division in the church in too much doctrine and in creeds that are too specific in their doctrinal declarations. Hence, they advocate that all these specific declarations of faith by which each church erects a wall of separation around itself be forgotten, erased, eliminated, that the confessions be broadened, generalized, and that on the basis of this broad declaration of general principles the various denominations merge, and thus realize the unity of the church. However, it should be evident that in this fashion an outward unity may indeed be effected, but only at the expense of the truth, at the cost of the church's faith, which is the same as saying that it is a unity without the Christ of the Scriptures. The church is not interested in an outward unity, that reveals itself in a mighty human institution, as, for instance, the present existing World Council of Churches. And the church on earth that understands the character of the true spiritual unity of the body of Christ and that realizes her calling with respect to the manifestation of this unity can never cooperate with such humanistic, faith-destroying, Christ-despising movements of amalgamation. The unity of the church is centered in Christ. If the church is to grow in this true unity, she must grow in Christ. She must not have less of Christ, but always more. And her Christ is in the Scriptures. Hence, she must appropriate the Christ of Holy Writ. And that means that she must instruct and be instructed in the truth. She must not seek union in the way of less, but rather in the way of more and richer doctrine. She must put aside all doctrines of men, to be sure; but she must ever grow in



the doctrine of Christ. Let the true church be ever so small in the world, she dare not seek the realization of her unity in any other direction than that of growing in the knowledge of Christ her Head, ‘till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.’ Only they that strive to approach that stature are really working for the manifestation of the unity of the church, and whatsoever is more than these is of the evil one.”<sup>{220}</sup>

Professor Hoeksema wrote specifically about the World Council of Churches, but we might include any similar ecumenism that promotes organizational unity over doctrinal unity and find that his statements are as accurate and as useful. Repeatedly through the history of the Christian church there have been wicked men who desired to lord it over the faith of others by taking illegitimate power within the church and then accusing those who do not recognize the “authority” of unfaithful men of some sort of schism or other. So successful and pervasive has this approach been that many have come to a place where they reject all Christian government in the church because of the excesses and wickedness of those who have been drawn by their natural lusts to places of power.

Even in the purportedly conservative denominations organizational unity has taken precedence over doctrinal unity. Scripture certainly calls for unity, but that unity must grow out of the unity of the faith or it has no more value than the unity of the tower of Babel.

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220. *Ibid.*, 606-607.

Instead, Scripture requires a unity arising from believing and speaking the same thing. “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all *speak* the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined in the same *mind* and in the same *judgment*” (First Corinthians 1:10, emphasis added).

Governmental and disciplinary unity arises from *speaking*, *thinking*, and *judging* based upon Scripture alone. Professor Reymond quotes J. Oliver Buswell’s *Systematic Theology*, “Shall...those who in all simplicity and honesty believe that the truth must be defended and expounded on certain scriptural issues...be the ones who are to be blamed for ‘dissensions’?...No,...dissensions are necessary in order that the truth may be vindicated. Those who dissent in the interest of truth are not the ones who are to be blamed for the dissension.”<sup>{221}</sup>

In this dissertation’s chapter on Presbyterian Minimalism, the point is made that much of what ails the churches today arises from a lack of confessional integrity on the part of the officers. When officers who do not agree with a church’s confessional standards are allowed into office, the governmental unity of the church, far from being enhanced, is actually disturbed and even undermined. In the long run this practice of allowing unconfessional men into church office can lead to a church becoming a synagogue of Satan.

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221. Cited in Reymond, *op. cit.*, 841.

### *The Holiness of the Church*

As discussed somewhat in chapter one of this dissertation, the Christian church is characterized in Scripture as having an all-pervading holiness. “This is the law of the house; Upon the top of the mountain the whole limit thereof round about shall be most holy. Behold, this is the law of the house” (Ezekiel 43:12). Professor Reymond expresses this holiness as being both definitive and processive. “The church is definitively holy,” claims Reymond, “in an absolute sense in that it is ‘in Christ.’ It is processively holy in a relative sense in that its sanctification is progressive, originating from the inner man and finding expression in the outer life.”<sup>(222)</sup> Of course, it is impossible to consider the abstract idea “church” apart from her members, and in his definition of the holiness of the church Professor Reymond wisely and biblically refrains from any attempt to do so. Reymond continues,

“We argued...that holiness, as an aspect of the *ordo salutis* relative to the individual saint, is both definitive and progressive. The same must be said about the true church as the *corporate* assembly of saints — that its holiness is both *definitive*, in the sense that, in union as it is with Christ, a radical breach with sin and uncleanness has occurred with regard to it, and *progressive*, in the sense that, God having declared its justification, its sanctification must and will *inevitably* follow. In other words, just as the individual Christian, who is *simul iustus et peccator* (‘at the same time righteous and sinner’), will grow in holiness, so the true church, which is also *simul iustus et*

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222. Reymond, *op. cit.*, 842.

*peccator*, will grow in holiness and consecration to Christ.”<sup>{223}</sup>

Significantly, Reymond does not ascribe the holiness of the church as a visible or invisible attribute. Rather, it is an attribute of the *true* church, beginning in the mind of God, imputed to the true church invisibly and finally having an historical outworking in the true church visibly. There is no such thing as a true holiness for the reprobate.<sup>{224}</sup> Professor Reymond rightly attributes holiness strictly to the true church, for there is no sense in which the reprobates who have attached themselves to the church have anything other than a pretended holiness. R. B. Kuiper, in his *The Glorious Body of Christ*, stated insightfully, “The church of Christ is the one and only organization in the world which is holy in this sense [of being given hearts to obey God’s commandments — RB]. That makes it incomparably the most glorious of all earthly societies. Holiness constitutes the church. The church is synonymous with holiness.”<sup>{225}</sup>

Scripture therefore refers to the people of God as the *holy* nation in both the Old Testament (Exodus 19:6) and the New Testament (First Peter 2:9-10). Members of Christ’s church are called *holy* ones or saints (Romans 1:7; First Corinthians 1:1-2; Colossians 1:2). The same Greek “word group” is used for the English words “holy,”

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223. *Ibid.*, 843. Underline is italics in original.

224. This fact will be discussed in more detail in a projected second volume, Lord willing, under the heading of the church’s duty to separate from the world.

225. R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1958), 58.

“saints,” and “set apart.”<sup>[226]</sup> Christians are holy first and foremost because they are in union with Jesus Christ (First Corinthians 6:17; Ephesians 5:31-32). In the context of this union with Christ they have been declared righteous, i.e. the righteousness of Christ has been imputed to them (Romans 5:17-19). As Professor John Murray wrote concerning union with Christ:

“Union with Christ is a very inclusive subject. It embraces the wide span of salvation from its ultimate source in the eternal election of God to its final fruition in the glorification of the elect. It is not simply a phase of the application of redemption; it underlies every aspect of redemption both in its accomplishment and in its application. Union with Christ binds all together and ensures that to all for whom Christ has purchased redemption he effectively applies and communicates the same.”<sup>[227]</sup>

Murray rightly pointed out in the passage just quoted that the holiness of the elect, from beginning to end, has to do entirely with their spiritual communion with Christ. They are spiritually united to the Savior (John 15:1-8; Romans 6:3-6), which is another way of saying that he is their spiritual and federal Head. He is the representative of all the elect in the same way that Adam represented the entire human race in the garden. The apostle therefore teaches that one is either “in Adam” or “in Christ” (Romans 5:12-19; First Corinthians

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226. Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, *op. cit.*, 8-9.

227. John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, 80), 165.

15:22). The Holy Spirit begets faith in the enlightened minds of sinners, as the Shorter Catechism rightly teaches. “The Spirit applieth to us the redemption purchased by Christ, by working faith in us, and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual calling.”<sup>{228}</sup> First Corinthians 1:30, “But of him are ye *in* Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and *righteousness*, and *sanctification*, and *redemption*” (Emphasis added). Thus the church’s holiness as it is expressed in righteousness, sanctification, and redemption is bound to the fact that the church is in union with Christ. “The holiness of the church, then, is inextricably related to its relationship with Christ; its union with him.”<sup>{229}</sup>

The holiness of the church then works out in three areas. The church is holy, first of all, with respect to its doctrine. In the soundness of its principles; in the purity of its precepts; in the excellency of its examples; and in the efficacy of its motives, the church has in Scripture the rules of a practical holiness that surpasses infinitely any holiness of sages or philosophers of the world.<sup>{230}</sup> The doctrines of the church, being founded upon the Scriptures alone, are most holy doctrines (Psalm 19:7-9). “What nation is there so great that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?”<sup>{231}</sup> “Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy,

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228. Shorter Catechism #30, *Confession*, 295.

229. Richard Bacon and W. Gary Crampton, *Built Upon The Rock: A Study of the Doctrine of the Church* (Dallas: Presbyterian Tracts, 1999), 19.

230. Herman Witsius, *Dissertations on The Apostles’ Creed* (Glasgow: Khull, Blackie & Co., 1823), II.358.

and just, and good.”<sup>{232}</sup> “If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness....”<sup>{233}</sup> “the acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness.”<sup>{234}</sup>

Not only is the church holy respecting its doctrine, it is also holy respecting its life and manners. The Old Testament church had a typical holiness that reflected its separation from the world in many carnal ordinances. The very food they ate, the clothing they wore, even the manner in which they plowed, planted, and reaped their fields, spoke of a true and inner holiness. The inner holiness consists of a changed heart; a mind that has learned to love obedience and to hate sin. The Christian church is now that *holy nation* (First Peter 2:9-10). Though it has fewer and simpler ordinances, yet the holiness typified by the ordinances is just as real and depends solely upon the purification of the mind by the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ.<sup>{235}</sup>

Finally, the church is holy with respect to the sacred protection God has promised to her (Psalm 105:14-15; Revelation 12:14-17). Not only has God promised the church a true and providential indefectibility; he has also promised that he will protect his church by means of the destruction of her enemies. God did not simply deliver Israel

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231. Deuteronomy 4:8

232. Romans 7:12

233. First Timothy 6:3

234. Titus 1:1

235. Witsius, *op. cit.*, II.358. cf. Titus 2:14.

from Egypt; he destroyed Pharaoh (Exodus chapter fourteen). He did not merely preserve his people under Esther and Mordecai; he slew Haman (Esther chapter nine). Those examples were typical of the fact that God delivers his people by the destruction of their enemies, especially by the destruction of Satan (Matthew 12:29; Hebrews 2:14-15; First John 3:8).

### *The Catholicity of the Church*

The third Nicene attribute of the church is that of catholicity. The church is nowhere in Scripture called “catholic,” but the church infers this attribute from the catholicity demanded by the great commission (Luke 24:47) and from the church now being called out of every nation, tribe, kindred, and tongue.<sup>{236}</sup> So Herman Witsius stated in his study of the Apostles’ Creed, “The epithet CATHOLIC does not occur in sacred writ. The first whom we find using it is Ignatius in his *Epistle to the Church of Smyrna*, if indeed that expression was in reality written by Ignatius, and not interpolated by some unfair hand.”<sup>{237}</sup>

Very clearly this dissertation denies the definition found in the papist document *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. There the anti-christ declares, “Particular Churches are fully catholic through their communion with one of them, the Church of Rome ‘which presides in charity.’ ‘For with this church, by reason of its pre-eminence, the whole church, that is faithful everywhere, must necessarily be in accord.’ Indeed, ‘from the incarnate Word’s descent to us, all Chris-

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236. Reymond, *op. cit.*, 843.

237. Witsius, *op. cit.*, II.359.



tian churches everywhere have held and hold the great Church that is here [at Rome] to be their only basis and foundation since, according to the Savior's promise, the gates of hell have never prevailed against her."<sup>{238}</sup>

This author not only denies that catholicity depends upon communion with the popish church, he claims that the so-called church spoken of in the catechism in the previous paragraph is in reality a synagogue of Satan.<sup>{239}</sup> Rather, the term "catholic" should be understood *first* as "comprehending all the diversities of places, times, persons, and states, and as denoting the whole family of God, whether now or formerly sojourning on the earth, and dispersed through all ages and quarters of the world."<sup>{240}</sup>

The catholicity of the church derives from three related characteristics: first the church is universal in scope, consisting as it does of all the elect to be gathered from the beginning to the end of the world (Hebrews 12:22-23; Ephesians 1:22-23; 5:25-26; etc.). Second, the church is now universal as opposed to the time when it was generally limited to one nation. The church since the ascension of Christ is catholic with respect to locality, nationality, and time. She is found first one place then another or in many places and nations at once. She consists of people of every race, nationality, and language such that it is altogether immaterial whether one is Jew or Gentile. Third, the church

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238. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Ligouri, MO: Ligouri Publications, 1994), 221.

239. WCF XXV.5, *Confession*, 109. cf. Revelation 2:9 and 18:2.

240. Witsius, *op. cit.*, II.359.

is universal respecting her doctrine. What is true in one place is true in every place. The external practices of the church are no different in Jerusalem than in Chicago. There may be some differences of local circumstances, to be sure. But the essence of the Christian faith and practice is uniform in every place. The shadows of the Old Testament have been abrogated for they no longer pertain to a catholic church that has no centralized worship.

### *The Apostolicity of the Church*

The fourth and last Nicene characteristic or attribute of the church is that the church is “apostolic.” Some Protestants have referred to this particular characteristic of the church as “Christian” rather than “apostolic.”<sup>[241]</sup> The church is apostolic only to the extent that it teaches the apostles’ doctrine. Not only does this attribute not refer to a succession of bishops, more to the point is the fact that when a church departs from apostolic doctrine to a sufficient degree it ceases being a church altogether. As Robert Reymond correctly asserted, “apostolicity must be primarily concerned with faithful adherence to the doctrine of the apostles, which was communicated by supernatural revelation and inscripturated by supernatural inspiration.”<sup>[242]</sup>

The Romanist interpretation of this term involves not only the inscripturated doctrine of the apostles, but also what *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* calls “the good deposit”...she has heard from the apostles.<sup>[243]</sup> Rome leaves the door wide open, then, for the numerous

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241. à Brakel, *op. cit.*

242. Reymond, *op. cit.*, 844.

extra-biblical traditions that have supposedly been passed down from the apostles themselves. Additionally, however, Rome has added an institutional aspect to this attribute. The same catechism goes on to claim, “she continues to be taught, sanctified, and guided by the apostles until Christ’s return, through their successors in pastoral office: the college of bishops, ‘assisted by priests, in union with the successor of Peter, the Church’s supreme pastor.’”<sup>{244}</sup>

Reymond quotes Ludwig Ott to the same end:

“In the unbroken succession of the Bishops from the Apostles the apostolic character of the Church most clearly appears. It is sufficient to point to the apostolic succession of the Roman Church, because the Roman bishop is the head of the whole church and vehicle of the infallible doctrinal power. Consequently the apostolic Church and unfalsified apostolic teaching are where Peter or his successor is.”<sup>{245}</sup>

Due to the specious claims of Rome, some Protestant theologians refer to this characteristic or attribute as “Christian” rather than “apostolic.” So Herman Witsius, “the church is also styled Christian, because she is the disciple of Christ and Christ is her Master; because she is the spouse of Christ, and Christ is her bridegroom; because she

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243. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 227.

244. *Ibid.*

245. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (St. Louis: Herder, 1960), 308. Cited in Reymond, *op. cit.*, 848.

is the body and fulness of Christ, being necessary to the fulness of his stature, and Christ is her Head. In short, she is so closely united with Christ, that she is even denominated *Christ*.”<sup>[246]</sup> In the same vein, à Brakel stated, “she is named ‘Christian’ because she alone embraces the doctrine of Christ and the life of Christ manifests itself to some degree in her life (Hebrews 6:1; Second John 9; First Corinthians 2:16).”<sup>[247]</sup>

This dissertation does not maintain, as some mistakenly have, that the reformed churches have enjoyed an unbroken succession of presbyters since the Apostles. However, given the fact that the reformed churches have and teach apostolic doctrine, it may rightly be said of them that they are apostolic churches. So while renouncing any sort of “landmarkism” succession,<sup>[248]</sup> it is still possible to see historically that there has always been a church existing that taught true apostolic doctrine. During the Apostles’ own day there were apostolic churches dispersed throughout the world (First Peter 1:1; James 1:1). Even after the death of the Apostles, this apostolic church continued to exist under the pre-Constantinian emperors who persecuted her but were unable to destroy her.

Following the period of greatest persecutions, the apostolic churches continued to exist even in the same physical territory with

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246. Witsius, *op. cit.*, II.361.

247. à Brakel, *op. cit.*

248. “Landmarkism” is that term that refers to an error common amongst some Baptists that the true church must derive from a succession of “right baptisms” going back directly and explicitly to John Baptist.

the antichrist (Second Thessalonians 2:4). Over a period of many years the apostolic church was first infiltrated and then permeated by the errors of popery. At first the errors were such that they vexed the souls of the righteous, but they eventually became such that the apostolic church was required by Scripture and conscience to depart. The church existed before the rise of popery; it existed where popish errors were gradually introduced and corrupted the church; and it existed and continues to exist subsequent to her separation from popery. She existed wherever the popish church existed, but this dissertation denies that the apostolic church was *ever* the popish church. It further denies that the apostolic church was found *in* the popish church. Rather, the popish church infiltrated the apostolic church, and the separation that took place at the Reformation was not of the reformers from the apostolic church, but of the apostolic church and the popish church in accordance with First John 2:19.

The apostolic church has existed wherever the two witnesses were (Revelation 11:3). It is of little significance that the apostolic churches may often have been few in number, if those churches had the apostolic witness then they constituted the apostolic church. Since Constantine there have always been some who, in either preaching or writing, have opposed the errors arising within the popish church. One particular church may have remained more pure in doctrine longer than another, but the purer churches always bore testimony against the error(s) of their day.

### ***THE MARKS OF THE TRUE CHURCH***

Subsequent to the Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it became necessary for the Reformers to distinguish between true and false churches. Roman polemicists claimed that Protestant churches could not possibly be true churches because they did not possess the four Nicene attributes.<sup>[249]</sup> They were not “one” because separate from Rome; they did not have Roman priests and laced the sacraments so they were not “holy;” they were located in the single area of northern Europe so they could not be “catholic;” and finally in renouncing the authority of the Pope they had no claim to be “apostolic.”<sup>[250]</sup>

Protestants proceeded to introduce into the controversy their concept of the marks of the church. G. C. Berkouwer, in his *The Church* explained:

“Surveying the history of the Church, we meet with a striking distinction...namely, the distinction between the attributes and marks of the Church. At first sight, the distinction is quite unclear, since one might expect that the Church can be known and precisely demarcated by means of her ‘attributes.’ However, closer inspection shows that there is an explicit motive underlying this distinction, which played a far-reaching role in the controversy between Rome and the Reformation and was related to the question of how one ought to view the Church’s

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249. Reymond, *op. cit.*, 850.

250. *Ibid.*

attributes...the judgment of the Reformation was that one had not yet said everything when one had referred only to the church's attributes. In speaking of the marks of the Church, the *notae ecclesiae*, the Reformation introduced a criterion by which the Church could be, and had to be, tested as to whether she was truly the church.

“...The notion of *notae*, with its unmistakable implications of criticism and testing, is directed against every presumption of the presence and verifiability of the attributes — in other words, against every static ecclesiology, in which everything is decided simply from the basis that a Church ‘exists’ and that she possesses a number of immediately recognizable, unassailable ‘attributes.’ Ultimately such a static ecclesiology no longer allows room for discussion about the ecclesiastical reality...in the Reformation it was precisely the *notae* that took on decisive significance, with the result that it was impossible to use the ‘attributes’ apologetically as an unthreatened and unassailable, aprioristic reality.

“...it is striking...that the four words themselves were never disputed, since the Reformers did not opt for other ‘attributes.’...Even after the Reformation, in spite of all the differences in interpretation which appeared with respect to the four words, this usage remained the same. But in the midst of this consonant terminology, the Reformers’ notion of the *notae* remained a disquieting element. Via the *notae*, the Reformers wanted to indicate from the Word of God ‘which is the true Church, since all

sects which are in the world assume to themselves the name of the Church' (*Belgic Confession*, Art. 29)."<sup>{251}</sup>

As this dissertation demonstrated in the previous section on the Nicene attributes, any attempt to use them to identify or discover the “true church” must end in failure and disappointment. The reason for the failure is found in the fact that there is no consensus regarding the *definition* of the attributes. Rome has so defined them as to exclude any organization but Rome from having them and at the same time to grant them to Rome *in their very definition*. As a result the Reformers used two and then three marks to distinguish the true church. This was especially important as Rome lost her stranglehold on northern Europe. Not only was there a danger of Roman resurgence, there were numerous sects arising with claims of being churches. As Witsius so cogently observed, “It is necessary, however, to take heed, that we associate with a *true Church*, lest we embrace a prostitute and an adulteress instead of the chaste Spouse of Christ.... But there is in particular one characteristic, by which, without great difficulty, you may discriminate the true Church of Christ from an adulteress, to wit, the truth of the heavenly doctrine.”<sup>{252}</sup> The chief or key mark of a true church is, not surprisingly, the proclamation of the truth.

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251. Gerrit C. Berkouwer, *The Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 13-14. Cited in Reymond, *op. cit.*, 850-51.

252. Witsius, *op. cit.*, II.365.



### *The True Proclamation of the Word of God*

There is a sense in which even the other mark(s) of a true church, whether they be one or two, can be subsumed under this one. “For where the truth obtains publicly, there also love and holiness flourish in their own way; nor can the pure word of God be preached anywhere without the sacraments being also administered lawfully in the same place and the discipline prescribed in the word of God being observed and thriving, since these two flow from the word of God and are appendages of it.”<sup>[253]</sup>

Three Scripture reasons are apparent why doctrine that is true to the Word of God is the key distinguishing mark of the true church. First, the true preaching of the Word is the primary means appointed by God for the gathering, preserving, and edifying of the elect. Second, the Word of God is a treasure that has been particularly placed in trust with the church. Finally, the truth of God is both the matter and the weapon of the church’s warfare in this present world.

Regarding the first reason, Scripture states: “Now therefore ye are no more strangers and pilgrims, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:19-22); “That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word” (Ephesians 5:26); “Of his own will begat he us with the Word of truth”

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253. Turretin, *op. cit.*, III.87.

(James 1:18); “Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth” (First Peter 1:22).

The second reason is similarly testified in Scripture itself: “...because that unto them were committed the oracles of God” (Romans 3:1-2); and “...which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth” (First Timothy 3:15).

Finally the church must ever be vigilant to maintain the purity of her doctrine in accordance with Scripture. “It was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3). These texts also make it evident that the true proclamation of the word is a *distinguishing* mark of a true church since Scripture regards it as *characteristic* of the church. Since something can be identified by its distinguishing marks, it is clear that this mark can be used as a safe guide in locating the true church or in determining whether an assembly claiming to be a Christian church is one in point of truth.

Scripture also affords us opportunity in applying the law of contradiction to discern the true church by the true proclamation of God’s word.<sup>{254}</sup> All assemblies and societies claiming to be churches abide in either false doctrine or true doctrine. But false and true doctrine are contradictories. Since false churches are exposed by their abiding in false doctrine, true churches must be discerned by *not* abiding in false doctrine. But the only way that a church can avoid abiding in false doctrine is by confessing true doctrine. Therefore, true churches may be discerned by the fact that they abide in true doctrine.<sup>{255}</sup>

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254. The law of contradiction, in its simplest form is “A is not non-A.”

False churches can be exposed by the Word of God: “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house” (Second John 9-10).<sup>{256}</sup> If the Word of truth is a means of exposing false churches, then by the law of contradiction the word is a distinguishing mark of the true church.

A third line of argumentation would be a syllogism along the following lines: The assembly in which God and Christ make their abode is the true church (Second Corinthians 6:16; Revelation 2:1). The Father and Christ dwell where their Word is received and kept (John 14:21, 23). Therefore, receiving and keeping God’s Word are distinguishing marks of the true church.<sup>{257}</sup>

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255. This argument does not commit the fallacy of “denying the antecedent.” Rather it relies upon the assertion that all non-true doctrine is false doctrine and that true doctrine and false doctrine must therefore be true contradictories. But if something is not non-A then it must be A. Therefore a church that does not abide in false doctrine (i.e., it is not non-A) must be a true church (i.e., it is A).

256. See the section of this dissertation dealing with the biblical use of the term “house” in chapters four and seven.

257. This is by a simple substitution of terms. If ‘P’ implies ‘Q’ and ‘Q’ implies ‘R,’ then ‘P’ implies ‘R.’ Irving M. Copi refers to this as the “hypothetical syllogism.” Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1972), 232-34.

Fourth, the true proclamation of God’s Word is confirmed by Scripture texts in which the church is described as submitting itself to Christ’s Word alone. “They continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42); “But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you. My sheep hear my voice” (John 10:26-27). Here the Lord asserted that those who are and are not of his flock are distinguished by the fact that some hear his voice while the others do not.<sup>[258]</sup> Inasmuch as sheep are characterized in this way, the fold that is intended for the should should also be so characterized. It may be objected that the hearing spoken of by Christ pertains to believing and receiving. As such it is a work of the heart and not observable; therefore it cannot be a distinguishing mark of the church. The context of Christ’s words, however, certainly seems to indicate that it was evident that there were some who heard *and followed* and others who did not. It is true that faith cannot be seen, but the effects of that faith are quite visible and therefore form a distinguishing mark in the profession of Christ’s Word together with an obedience to it (Romans 10:10, 17).

This interpretation is confirmed at John 8:31-32, where Christ stated, “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed [*alêthôs* — truly, really, or actually]; and ye shall know the truth, and

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258. The “hearing” spoken of here is not simply an outward call, for indeed the world itself might hear the outward call of the gospel without obeying. Rather, this “hearing” refers to a “hearkening” or “obeying” of Christ’s voice and is the semantic equivalent of “believing,” just as sometimes “receiving,” “eating,” “resting,” and so forth are used as synonyms for believing. The case here thus rests on the fact that Christ uses the term “hear” in a theologically high-context sense.

the truth shall make you free.” Here it is clear that a *true* disciple (one who is truly a disciple of Christ) can be distinguished by his knowing and continuing in Christ’s word. Of course every society that claims to be a church also boasts that its doctrine is in accordance with God’s word. This dissertation simply points out that it is one thing to *claim* that doctrine is in accordance with God’s word; it may be something else for it actually to be so. Yet even the fact that the claim is made demonstrates that every society claiming to be Christian wants at least the pretense of continuing in Christ’s word. Therefore it is not only safe and expedient, but even necessary, to examine a church’s doctrine by the touchstone of Scripture.

Another objection might be raised that not all people are as educated as some in the doctrines of a church or in the Scriptures themselves. How could biblical doctrine be a distinguishing mark, it might be asked, if there are many who cannot or who do not recognize the mark? Reformed theologians<sup>(259)</sup> have pointed out that simply because the ignorant cannot test gold by a touchstone, that does not make the test any less valid. Gold can still be identified and that with certainty. The same is true respecting biblical doctrine. If someone who has his understanding darkened cannot comprehend the things of God’s Spirit, such ignorance does not negate the test itself. He who is illuminated and taught by the Spirit of God is fully assured of the foundational doctrines of Scripture and whether they are proclaimed by a society, ignored by that society, or even denied by it. If the doctrines are rightly proclaimed by a given society, then that society claiming to be a church has a *right* to make the claim.

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259. à Brakel, *op. cit.*

The question remains, however, as to how the uneducated may determine to what society they ought to join themselves. If they have joined themselves to some particular congregation, how will they discern whether they have joined a true church? Of course, the question remains regardless of what distinguishing mark one proposes as the proper touchstone, so it is no more difficult a question for the correct mark(s) than for any incorrect mark(s). However, it is clear that God teaches and commends searching and testing all things by his word (Acts 17:10-12; John 7:16-17; 5:39). Yet if God should choose to reveal such a thing to anyone who searches the Scripture, that one must confess that it is purely of God's grace that it has been revealed to him, and not by any extra ability he may have more than his neighbor (Matthew 13:11). One who is blind may ignorantly join himself to the true church, but so long as he remains unconverted, he will not benefit by his joining. Or he may blindly join himself to a false church, in which case he will not only fail to benefit, his soul will be positively harmed. It is only when God converts his elect that they *know* the true church by his word (John 10:27; Psalm 122:1-2) and rejoice to join it (John 8:32, 36). There is certainly no safety in failing to join the true church because one is not yet satisfied that it is a perfect church.

Some people have mistakenly maintained that the marks of the true church must be present in an almost absolute or perfect degree. Thus they object that even though the proclamation of true doctrine is the chief mark of the true church, yet every church has some measure of error in it. Because of the existence of some error in every church they maintain that they are under no obligation to join themselves to any particular church, but are obligated to worship God only at home or in families.

This author agrees with the Westminster Confession which states at XXV.4, 5 that true churches may be more or less pure and yet be true churches. “This catholic church hath been sometimes more, sometimes less visible. And particular churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and publick worship performed more or less purely in them. The purest churches under heaven are subject both to mixture and error;...<sup>{260}</sup> Thus this dissertation also concludes that though there are errors in a church, nevertheless if it is a true church, the Word and true doctrine will still be found in her such that there will be those who defend the truth and oppose error.

Further, it must be conceded that not all errors pertain to the foundation of truth. Thus while truth and error may be mixed in a given assembly, a true church will always proclaim the truth whereby the Shepherd’s voice can be known by the sheep and they can be saved, i.e. where the sheep can be justified and sanctified. If an assembly is so overwhelmed by error that saving truth is not heard, though *some* truths may be present, that particular church ceases to be a true church if ever it was one. At such a time as a church proclaims another gospel or confuses and confounds the true gospel so as to give an uncertain sound (First Corinthians 14:8), that church leaves off being a true church and all true believers are not only allowed to separate themselves from it, they are obligated to do so. God will draw his elect out of such a church as that (Matthew 24:24).

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260. WCF XXV.4, 5, *Confession*, 109.

One final caution should be noted. The Word of God, being eternal truth (John 17:17), cannot err nor can it cause men to err. But the understanding and judgment of men *can* err. Though understanding can err, it does not always err nor must a man always remain uncertain about whether his judgment is in error or not. A person with the Spirit of God can *know* the things of God. This fact does not imply an infallible judgment; it simply demonstrates that spiritual men are capable of knowing the truth and of being certain that they know the truth about the things that God has revealed in Scripture. “And we believe and are *sure* that thou art the Christ” (John 6:69); “now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might *know* the things that are freely given to us of God” (First Corinthians 2:12); “And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is *truth*” (First John 5:6).

A person would be in far greater danger if he had only the testimony of an assembly about itself because a part of the falsity of a false church is its claim to be a true church. Consequently one must have an infallible mark to distinguish the true church, which mark is itself free of error and that cannot cause one to err. But such a criterion is true of only one thing: the Word of God. If one therefore hears a church claim to be a true church, and examines the doctrine and life of that church by the Word of God alone and finds them to be in harmony with it, he may rightly say, “Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world” (John 4:42). The Word of God is the one distinguishing mark that is infallible and it is therefore foundational to the other mark(s) of a true church.



### *Sacraments and Discipline*

The Protestant Reformation also held out the right administration of the sacraments and the keys of the kingdom as distinguishing marks of the true church. This author is in full agreement with Professor Reymond when he states, "...while all three marks are proper tests of the true church and extremely important, the three are not really coordinate. While the second and third are necessary for the *well-being* (or *bene esse*) of the church, they are not necessary for the *being* (or *esse*) of the church. Only the first [the true proclamation of the Word of God — RB] is really necessary for the being of the church."<sup>[261]</sup> It is the Word of God that determines what is the right administration of the sacraments and the faithful exercise of church discipline, and so the latter two are dependent upon the Word of God rather than coordinate with the Word of God. Wherever the first distinguishing mark is found in truth the others will also be found.

The sacraments have been instituted by Christ in his Word; they are described and regulated by the Word; and they are effectual to the elect only as they are accompanied by the Word. It is clear from these three considerations that the "right administration of the sacraments" is itself a derived concept from the true proclamation of God's Word. If the Lord wills, the subject of the sacraments both in general and in particulars will be taken up in the second volume of this work.<sup>[262]</sup> The sacraments are seals of the covenant of grace and as such, are effectual

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261. Reymond, *op. cit.*, 854.

262. The author here projects his desire to descend to the particulars of ecclesiastical government in a second volume of this present work.

for the elect alone. The effectual application of the sacraments does not mean that they are to be administered only to those who are known to be elect. Such would be an impossible state of affairs for mere men to administer.

When the sacraments instituted by Christ are administered by a true church of Christ, they may be applied externally to the elect or to the non-elect. But they are means of *grace* to the elect alone and that is assured not by the minister's ability to discern the elect, but by the Holy Spirit's distinction between the elect and the non-elect. When the sacraments are applied to the non-elect in the visible church, it is not received by them as a means of grace but as a testimony that shall rise up against them in the day of judgment. In the same manner, Ishmael and Esau had the *sign* of the covenant in the Old Testament as did many unbelieving and non-elect Jews. Yet God made his covenant effectual in Isaac and Jacob. The sign was the same externally — it was God who made them to differ as Isaac and Jacob were the recipients of saving grace.

In a similar fashion to the right administration of the sacraments, the faithful exercise of church discipline is a subsidiary mark of the true church because it also is dependent upon the proclamation of the true gospel and not coordinate with it. The keys of the kingdom, i.e. the power of binding and loosing, are given in order to include or exclude those whom the Word commands to include or exclude. The Reformers generally regarded the keys to consist of doctrine and discipline.

The Christian church is an assembly that is separate from the world. A significant part of that separation from the world is seen in the holiness of the church's membership. The church has the responsi-

bility from her Lord, therefore, to keep out those who either do not hold to true doctrine or who do not live according to it (Matthew 18:17-20; First Corinthians 5:13; Second Thessalonians 3:14; Titus 3:10). The keys cannot rightly be used independently of the Word of God, however. If those who believe true doctrine and walk in a godly manner are included while at the same time those who err in doctrine and lead offensive lives are excluded or cast out, then the keys are used correctly and biblical discipline is faithfully exercised.

If the church regularly includes people regardless of their life and doctrine and excludes or condemns those who are orthodox in doctrine and holy in their walk, such a practice evidences that it is a false church. Imperfection, of course, is observed everywhere in this fallen world. Imperfection accompanying faithfulness does not by itself nullify a matter. So also, imperfection in the use of the keys does not nullify a generally faithful exercise of discipline. Though true churches may vary in their levels of consistency in this matter, yet the proper and faithful use of the key of discipline will be found in the true church.

An extended quotation from Professor Reymond will bring this discussion of the attributes and marks of the church to a conclusion:

“Applying the Reformers’ marks of the church to the ecclesiastical situation, according to the creeds of the Reformation the invisible church is universal and consists of the whole body of the elect of every age both in heaven and on earth, that is, all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, the invisible church is simply the church *as God sees it*. The visible ‘one holy catholic and apostolic’ church is the Christian community throughout

the world *as we see it*, represented by the world's many individual local churches where the word of God is rightly taught, where the sacraments are rightly administered, and where a faithful attempt is made through church discipline to remove the chaff that would impede the free exercise of faithful preaching and the proper administration of the sacraments. Some churches have fallen so far away from apostolic doctrine that they have virtually become no churches at all, as is the case with the churches under the governance of Rome."<sup>[263]</sup>

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263. Reymond, *op. cit.*, 860.

## **7. SOME FURTHER DISTINCTIONS**

### ***CHURCH***

#### ***The Local Congregation***

Scripturally speaking, the term “church” refers not only to the whole multitude of men who worship the true God and Christ. The term can also signify a body of those in any particular locality who are in the same category of those who call upon the true and living God according to his Word (Acts 14:23; First Corinthians 16:19; Romans 16:3-5; Colossians 4:15; etc.). This local *manifestation* of the visible church universal is *also* called by Scripture “a church.” The church of God, as it is universal and involves not only presently living members, but also members dead and members not yet born, is *one*. The church of God as it is local and involves those who profess Christ together with their children is plural, i.e. *many*.

Previous chapters of this dissertation addressed the catholic (general or universal) visible church as an historical outworking of the ideal church existing eternally in the mind of God. It is the point of view of this dissertation that the catholic visible church is the historical outworking of the ideal church. This point is necessary to press under the heading of the local congregation for two reasons. First, because there have been and are those who maintain that the local congregation is either primary or that there is no church of all the elect, but that the general visible church is at best a mere *post rem* abstraction. However, we should call to mind Calvin’s statement “we call by the name of ‘the church’ *the entire multitude* of men scattered *throughout the world*, who profess to worship the one God and

Christ.”<sup>(264)</sup> Second, however, it must be kept always in mind that the universal church is *made visible* as it assembles, which assemblies take place in times and locations that we characterize as local congregations.

The universal church spoken of by Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* is not a mere conceptualization of men or an abstraction based upon the experience one may have of many local congregations. Properly understood, it is the church of God *as seen by men’s judgment*. But men only see the church as it assembles locally for worship or for other ecclesiastical functions such as ordinations, judgments, and writing of confessions. Thus while it is certainly true that the visible church consists of the whole multitude throughout the world who profess the true religion, it is also true that they are *seen* as visible only as they assemble. Those assemblies are — by the very nature of what an assembly is — local congregations.

When this writer, then, speaks of either the universal church or the local church as the *primary* outworking historically of the ideal church in the mind of God, the question he is addressing is not one of church government, for it may be that several congregations may send delegates to form a classis or synod of congregations. Neither is the question addressed whether a classis or synod has authority to plant local congregations. Both of those questions are important questions of church government, to be sure. Nor are they questions of no concern at all to this dissertation. But they are not the questions presently before us.

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264. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.i.7. Emphasis added.

The question of the relationship between the local congregation and the universal or general church arises because Scripture uses the same term for both. Just as Scripture sometimes uses the term “church” to refer to all those throughout the world who call upon Christ as Savior, so also do we find in Scripture use of the same term to refer to the local assembly. “Church” sometimes signifies a body of those who profess the Lord Jesus Christ and their children *in any particular place* (see references above) and this local manifestation of the universal church is called “the church” with as much authority as is the universal church. The church of God, then, is one and universal. But the church of God is also many and local. As with the visible and invisible distinction, we do not speak properly of two churches, but of a local *manifestation* of a universal ingathering that is continuing to take place *in time and over time*.

It is thus necessary to speak of local congregations not as independent existences; not as totally complete in themselves without any reference to any other congregation in the catholic (universal) church. Nevertheless, the biblical use of the terminology does not allow us to define the local congregation as merely a *part* of the church or even as a *branch* of the church. Though that language is common when men speak of various denominations, the Scriptures do not speak of the local assemblies in that manner. The Westminster “Form of Presbyterian Church Government” refers to local assemblies as *members* of the general church visible and that is probably the best way to think of it.<sup>{265}</sup> The Scriptures, in fact, emphasize the fact that each assembly does have a functional completion and unity in itself. Paul therefore

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265. “Of the Church,” *Confession*, 398.

was able to say of the Corinthian church that by God's grace they were enriched in everything and came behind in no gift (First Corinthians 1:4-9). While overstating the case for the local congregation somewhat, Louis Berkhof maintained, "Every local church is a complete church of Christ, fully equipped with everything that is required for its government. It has absolutely no need of it that any government should be imposed upon it from without."<sup>266</sup>

It is an unhealthy state of affairs for a Christian not to be an active member of a local congregation. It is *through* the local congregation that the church manifests itself to the Christian and it is by participation in the local assemblies that the Christian shows himself to be faithful to Christ. There may be times when the church is less visible that a Christian will not be able to take part in a local assembly because there is none that shows the marks of the true church (regarding which see below in this chapter). However, such times are both rare and dangerous. Apart from active participation in a local congregation a Christian's faith will become lopsided and anemic.

At the same time it must necessarily be acknowledged that not every Christian will be or can be a member of some particular congregation. The Eunuch who was baptized by Philip was a member of no discernible local congregation, yet he was in the general visible church as his baptism attested. Likewise it may be that a person in some remote location apart from the ministry of any local congregation may be converted through the reading of Scripture or of a gospel tract or of a radio broadcast or some similar means. Or it may be that imprisonment, shipwreck, banishment, or some other circumstance

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266. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 589.



might prevent him from joining a local congregation. It is impossible to deny that such a one is altogether divorced from the visible church, though he is quite low in visibility, being alone. A person in such circumstances, it should be said, is *fit* to join a local congregation and if it were possible *ought* to join one. But so long as he is isolated from any local assembly we deny that he is part of a local congregation though we do not deny but rather affirm that he is a part of the general visible church.

This consideration forces the conclusion that while particular congregations are members of the general visible church, they do not *exhaust* the membership of the general visible church. A person is not made a part of the general visible church *by virtue of* his participation in a local congregation. Nor is it always the case that one who professes the true religion will be circumstantially enabled to be a part of a local congregation. Thus we see that there is not an absolute identity between the membership of the general visible church and the aggregate membership of all local congregations. But the general visible church is visible *in context of* the local congregations that are members of it. It becomes necessary at this point to attempt to reconcile this seeming logical difficulty (an epistemological problem).

As James Bannerman, the nineteenth century Free Church of Scotland scholar, well observed: “If all professing Christians throughout the world could meet together in one place, and join in the observance of ordinances in one assembly, they would form a visible society in the strictest sense of the term *one*, — being united among themselves, and separated from the rest of mankind by the profession of a common faith, and by fellowship in the same outward solemnities.”<sup>{267}</sup> Thus if the multitude of men who make up the visible church

universal were *not* scattered over the face of the earth but lived in one locality with a facility large enough to hold them all, there would be no epistemological distinction between the local congregation and the universal church. Bannerman continued, “The separation, then, of the congregations of this visible Church from each other by distance of place, by difference of language, by varieties of administration, by different modes of worship and different outward observations, is a separation accidental and not essential, and cannot affect the fact of that higher unity that belongs to them as knit together in the bond of an external covenant.”<sup>(268)</sup> Of course this idea can be seen most clearly if we consider the church on the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter two. Acts 2:1, speaking of all believers alive on the earth at that time,<sup>(269)</sup> states “they were all with one accord in one place.” Granted the fact that very soon men “out of every nation under heaven” would be converted and then presumably some of them would return to their original homes (verses 5ff.), at the moment of time spoken of in verse one the entire church alive on earth met together in one place. The single existing local congregation of Christ’s church was co-extensive, as far as is known, with the church catholic.

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267. J. Bannerman, *op. cit.*, I.41. Underline is italicized in original.

268. *Ibid.*, 45. This dissertation takes some exception to Bannerman’s phrase “external covenant.” A better phrase in this writer’s opinion, would be “knit together in the external bonds of the covenant.”

269. Of course there may have been others in other parts of the world whose existence was not reported by the Spirit — but we have no knowledge of that since no such thing has been disclosed.

As God’s Spirit called others to him that day, “they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (verses 41-42). Ignoring for the time being those who may have returned to their respective provinces after the celebrations of Pentecost were past (verses 9-11), there continued *in Jerusalem* a great number of people who formed the membership of the church at Jerusalem. Even though they lived in the same city or its environs, yet they were too numerous to form a single local congregation. Still, verse 47 informs us that “the Lord added to *the church* daily such as should be saved.” The newly saved were not added to “the churches,” but to “the church.”

Yet, in spite of the fact that verse 47 clearly refers to all the believers as “the church,” they met not only in the temple but also broke bread “from house to house.” The phrase “from house to house” has led some to conclude that what is spoken of in verse 46 must be the private meals eaten in private homes (or at least social meals of a few eaten in private homes). Matthew Henry, however, came closer to the truth in this writer’s opinion in his comment on verse 46. Henry commented,

“They frequently joined in the ordinance of the Lord’s supper. They continued *in the breaking of bread*, in celebrating that memorial of their Master’s death, as those that were not ashamed to own their relation to, and their dependence upon, Christ and him crucified.... They broke bread *from house to house; kat’ oikon — house by house*; they did not think fit to celebrate the Eucharist in the tem-

ple, for that was peculiar to the Christian institutes, and therefore they administered that ordinance in private houses, choosing such houses of the converted Christians as were convenient, to which the neighbors resorted; and they went out from one to another of these little synagogues or domestic chapels, houses that had churches in them, and there celebrated the Eucharist with those that usually met there to worship God.”<sup>{270}</sup>

Similarly, the Westminster delegate John Lightfoot claimed, “*breaking of bread*, in these places we are now upon, must not be understood of their ordinary eating together, but of the Eucharist; which the Syriac interpreter does render so in express terms: a parallel to which we have in I Cor. x.16; Acts xx.7.”<sup>{271}</sup> The present author would add that not only is the idea of “breaking bread” an ecclesiastical idea in Acts 2:46, so too is the phrase “from house to house.”

At this point we must recall to mind that the eldership of the synagogue was known as the *beth din* or house of justice (judging). The very synagogue itself was called by the Jews (and continues to the present day) their *beth knesset* or house of assembly. Further, as the synagogue was the place of worship for the covenant community it became known as the *beth tephillah* or house of prayer. Accordingly, while it may very well be the case that the earliest Christian meetings

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270. Matthew Henry, *op. cit.*, 6.28. Underline is italicized in original.

271. John Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraica* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989 reprint of Oxford Univ. 1859 edition), 4.36. Underline is italics in original.

were held in private homes, that is not the significance of the breaking of bread taking place from house to house. The early Christians regarded the assemblies in which they administered the Lord's Supper to be their Christian synagogues.<sup>{272}</sup> By the end of the second chapter of Acts, then, a single *beth kneset*<sup>{273}</sup> had become an undisclosed plurality of them.<sup>{274}</sup> In Acts 5:42 the same idea of a plurality of Christian synagogues is held forth to us. Though the English phraseology of Acts 5:42 is somewhat different from Acts 2:46, the Greek phraseology of *kat' oikon* is identical. They were not simply teaching and preaching Jesus Christ in private homes considered as such. Rather they were teaching and preaching Jesus Christ in the Christian assemblies, whether those assemblies were taking place within the walls of private homes or elsewhere.

In a similar vein, the book of Acts informs us of an official persecution carried out against "the church which was at Jerusalem" in Acts 8:1ff. At Acts 8:3 the Scripture informs us that Saul (later to be known as Paul) "made havoc of the church, entering into every house,..." Note the use of the singular term "church," along with the distributive

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272. See, too, James 2:2 where the Greek reads, "*ean gar eiselthe eis ten sunagogen humon.*"

273. See Acts 2:2, "it filled all the *house* where they [120 strong] were sitting." Not only could my private dwelling not accommodate 120 people, neither could the sanctuary of the church I pastor.

274. Though the Greek *kat' oikon* utilizes the singular form of the noun, it is nevertheless idiomatically distributive. Thus "from house to house" is an excellent translation of the idiom and preserves the implication of a plurality of synagogues.

idea of “every house.” In order to hale the Christians into prison, Saul entered *kata tous oikous*. While it is linguistically *possible* that Scripture is reporting that Saul sought out the private dwellings of Christians in this passage, what is far more likely is that he entered the Christian assemblies *as they took place* and caught the Christians “red-handed,” so to speak. Note carefully how Saul, but as the converted Paul, related this very incident to King Agrippa: “which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests;<sup>[275]</sup> and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft *in every synagogue*, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities” (Acts 26:10-11).

It is important that we approach “an argument from silence” with great care and not build something out of a non-statement such as, “Paul did not say he was not persecuting Christians in the public baths, so he must have been doing it.” Such an argument would, of course, be fallacious. What follows is not that sort of argument. Rather, what we have is an *implication* that arises by good and necessary consequence by comparing two passages of Scripture that relate the same event. Luke explains to his readers in Acts 26 by way of Paul’s explication what he intended for us to understand by *kata tous oikous* in Acts 8:3. Paul’s silence regarding private homes in Acts 26:10-11 is an “eloquent silence” for two reasons: first he described the methodology by which he carried out his fury on the church in

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275. See Chapter Four for a discussion of the authority of the ecclesiastical courts in Old Testament Israel.

Acts chapter eight and that fury involved persecuting the church in every synagogue (*kata pasas tas sunagogas*), though no synagogues are *apparently* mentioned in Acts 8:1ff. Second, the synagogue was known to the Jews of that day as well as this as the *beth kneset* or *house* of assembly. Thus we find that while mention of the local synagogue (or local congregation) is *apparently* missing in Acts 8:1ff., the two passages mesh perfectly (cohere) *if* we understand the “house” of Acts 8:3 to be the same place spoken of as the “synagogue” in Acts 26:11. This also fits with Christ’s own prophecy in Matthew 10:17, “They will deliver you up to the councils [literally “to the Sanhedrin” *sunedria* or “synod”] and in their synagogues they will scourge you.” This same phraseology is borne out in Acts 20:20, where Paul taught “publicly, even from house to house,” or *demosia kai kat’ oikous*. There is no reason from the phrase “from house to house” to suppose that Paul was conducting tutoring sessions in private homes. Given the language of both the Old Testament and the New Testament, however, there is good reason to suppose that Paul was teaching in the public meeting houses.

A further indication that the early Christians thought of their local congregations as Christian synagogues is found in First Corinthians chapters five and six. Chapter five of First Corinthians will be dealt with further in the section on the church as the representative eldership later in this chapter. For now we turn our attention to First Corinthians chapter six. Paul was alarmed that the Corinthian believers, who lived in a godless society with unjust laws, preferred going to the wicked to settle their disputes rather than having them adjudicated by those in the church who knew, submitted to, and practiced the righteousness of God’s law. Paul seems in this passage to regard the eldership of the local congregation as a sort of Christian *beth din*.

Significantly, Paul was not referring to criminal activity that would properly have come before the Corinthian magistrates.

Of course, modern day antinomians and libertines are quite fond of quoting this passage, but their reason for doing so is corrupt. They want to commit their criminal actions without fear of reprisal. If they can keep a Christian from taking them to the civil magistrate, they believe that few churches would do anything toward them but shrug their ecclesiastical shoulders. This is one reason why church sessions must be willing to pronounce excommunication against the recalcitrant offender. “If he neglect to hear the church let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican” (Matthew 18:17). But there is nothing at all inconsistent about taking a heathen or publican before the ungodly magistrate for justice because the heathen or publican (remember that the publican worked for the heathen Roman government) regarded the justice of the wicked. Thus if one refuses to hear God’s *beth din* in the local congregation where he will be treated with reclaiming mercy, the *beth din* should turn him over to Satan for destruction of the flesh so that the spirit may be saved in the day of Jesus Christ.

Paul expressed surprise to such a degree in First Corinthians chapter six that we could fairly describe him as outraged at the situation. Brethren who trespassed against one another were taking their complaints to the *wicked* rather than to the *beth din* of the local congregation. Rome had removed most jurisdiction from the local synagogue of Palestine and placed it in the hands of Roman governors (Matthew 27:2; John 19:15; etc.). Because of Roman interference, the synagogue’s *beth din* had been reduced for all practical matters to what amounted simply to voluntary arbitration. The only power of



enforcement that the synagogue had, then, was reduced to its moral influence. The moral influence of the eldership of the synagogue was therefore paramount. In the Jewish synagogue, the elders of the synagogue would be seen as naturally the most qualified in the community to arbitrate disputes between members of the synagogue. The title of such men, as Chapter Four of this dissertation shows, was that of “wise men” (*chokmim*). Not only did their judgment carry great weight within the Jewish community, their judgments were also useful in preventing civil litigation when Jews lived in heathen nations (i.e., outside Palestine).<sup>[276]</sup>

No doubt it was to this synagogue arrangement that Paul referred when he warned the Corinthian Christians in First Corinthians 6:1 against going to court before the heathen rather than before the *beth din* of the local congregation. The church at Corinth arose originally from the Jewish synagogue in Corinth (Acts 18:8ff.) and Paul chided them in his epistle for failing to do as the synagogue did. Paul’s astonishment is on the surface of his rhetorical question: “Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints?” Paul seems near bewilderment as he considers that these Corinthians were “telling it to the heathen” rather than “telling it to the church.” Paul went on to ask the Corinthians, “is it so that there cannot be found among you one wise man” (*sophos oude eis*, not one *chakam*) “who shall be able to decide between his brethren, but brother goeth to law with brother, and that before unbelievers” (First Corinthians 6:5-6; cp. Acts 18:4-8). Paul believed that the local con-

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276. D. Bannerman, *op. cit.*, 147.

gregation of Christians should behave themselves as the synagogue would do in a similar circumstance.

These passages and considerations taken together demonstrate that the local congregation, in many respects, grew out of the synagogue. The local congregation, therefore, can be seen to sustain a relationship to the universal church that is not totally dissimilar to the relationship that the synagogue had to the entire nation of Israel.<sup>(277)</sup> The existence of separate congregations throughout the whole world does not imply schism in the church of Christ. In order for a true schism to exist, there must be some violation of some of the scriptural bonds of unity.<sup>(278)</sup> However, the mere existence of separate or distinct congregations (local congregations) is not, in itself, a sign of schism. There have, in fact, been distinct congregations of the Lord's church since shortly after Pentecost in Acts chapter two, and even long before that if we look back with an eye to the synagogue. Some separation in the body of Christ is due to weakness and sin in Christians who make up the church; another part of the separation in the body of Christ is due to the essential character of a church as local and particular.<sup>(279)</sup>

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277. Cf. too Matthew 21:43, "therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to *a nation* bringing forth the fruits thereof" and First Peter 2:9, "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, *an holy nation*, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."

278. Thomas M'Crie, *The Unity of the Church* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage, 1989), 95.

279. J. Bannerman, *op. cit.*, I.46.

Nevertheless, where schism *does* exist, it is by its definition, the result of the wickedness of those who are in a church. As Bannerman correctly observed, “That can be no light offense which gives to the one kingdom of God in this world the appearance of a kingdom divided against itself, and liable to fall.... [F]or parties to separate wantonly, and on insufficient grounds, from the communion of the visible Church, is a grave and serious offense against the authority of Christ in His house.”<sup>{280}</sup>

This understanding of the distinction to be maintained between the local congregation and the general or universal church is also helpful to understanding the indefectibility of the church. The indefectibility of the church has been discussed somewhat in the chapter on invisibility and will be discussed again below under the subject of the Nicene attributes of the church. Christ promised that the church built upon him and the Scripture in turn,<sup>{281}</sup> refers not to any local church, including the church at Rome. Rather the promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church applies to the universal church.<sup>{282}</sup> “The promise of perpetuity, and the fulfillment of that promise in the

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280. *Ibid.*, I.48.

281. We must understand the phrase “apostles and prophets” in Ephesians 2:20 to refer to their inspired writings and not to their persons or even to their offices.

282. Of greatest significance is the fact that Christ’s death was unable to prevail against his church, as he demonstrated by his resurrection. Subsequently, however, we see that promise further fulfilled in his abiding with his church to the end of time (cf. Matthew 28:18-20).

continual presence of Christ through His Spirit with the Church, belong to it in its character as catholic and not as local.”<sup>{283}</sup>

Not only is it evident that some local assemblies that flourished for a time are now gone; more importantly for our epistemology, Scripture explains how it can be that when Christ promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against his church, the fact is undeniable that there are some local assemblies that are no more. As this dissertation has already observed above, this promise of perpetuity was given not to any particular congregation, but to the church generally. Thus these nearly 2,000 years later the church of Christ does exist. Undeniably the head of the church himself has removed the candlesticks of some particular congregations. The universal church, though at times less visible than at others,<sup>{284}</sup> has nevertheless prevailed over the Dragon by the blood of the Lamb and the word of her testimony (Revelation 12:11). The local congregation, by its very nature as a true church of Christ, *must* be a manifestation of the body of Christ or church universal. To the extent that a local congregation fails to express the truth as it is in Christ Jesus, to that very extent it becomes less of a beacon to the truth and may finally even have its candlestick removed by Christ himself (Revelation 2:5).

Moreover, some local congregations and even denominations have so departed from the truth of the gospel as to be no longer churches of Christ but synagogues of Satan.<sup>{285}</sup> The buildings may

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283. J. Bannerman, *op. cit.*, I.51.

284. As, for example, during the centuries just prior to the Reformation there was a significant decrease in visibility for the church.

still stand, to be sure. There may be a certain antiquity to the organization or institution, but it is not founded upon Christ the Rock and is therefore none of his. As we shall see later in this chapter, the preaching of the true gospel is the irreducible mark of a true church — the *sine qua non*. Thus the Reformers, with a remarkable unanimity, declared that any so-called church that preaches a false gospel is a false church. Further, as historicists, they applied Revelation chapter eighteen to false churches generally and to Rome particularly, such that they believed rightly that Christians have a duty before the Lord to separate from apostate communions. “Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues. For her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities” (Revelation 18:4b-5).

Thus we consider the causes of divisions in the church of Christ and are humbled in the dust for our sins. To think that those who proclaim a doctrine of reconciliation cannot be reconciled among themselves; that those who declare peace have become the occasion of such discord is to realize what a stumbling and offense our bickering has become. These are genuine concerns and should bring forth mourning and fasting from all genuine believers. And yet the result of so much needless division and separation over trifles as exist in the church today has also given rise to an even greater evil: latitudinarian evangelicalism.

Thomas M’Crie was a founding minister in the Constitutional Associate Presbytery of Scotland in 1806. M’Crie’s advice is as lively and apt today as it was then:

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285. WCF XXV.5, *Confession*, 109.

“Mournful as the divisions in the church are, and anxious as all its genuine friends must be to see them cured, it is their duty to examine carefully the plans which may be proposed for attaining this desirable end. We must not do evil that good may come; and there are sacrifices too costly to be made for the procuring of peace with fellow Christians.

“Is it necessary to remind you, that unity and peace are not always good, nor a sure and infallible mark of a true and pure church? We know that there is a church that has long boasted of her catholic unity notwithstanding all the corruptions which pollute her communion; and that within her pale the whole world called Christian once enjoyed a profound repose, and it could be said, ‘Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language.’ It was a union and peace founded in ignorance, delusion, implicit faith, and a base subjection to human authority; and supported by the arts of compulsion and terror.

“But there are other methods by which Christians may be deceived, and the interests of religion deeply injured, under the pretext or with the view of uniting its friends. Among these I know none more imposing, nor from which greater danger is to be apprehended in the present time, than that which proceeds on the scheme of principles usually styled latitudinarian.

“It has obtained this name because it proclaims an undue latitude in matters of religion, which persons may take to themselves or give to others. Its abettors make

light of the differences which subsist among religious parties, and prepare to unite them on the common principles on which they are already agreed, in the way of burying the rest in silence, or of stipulating mutual forbearance and charity with respect to everything about which they may differ in opinion or practice....

“These plans are more or less dangerous according to the extent to which they are carried, and the errors or abuses which may prevail among the parties which they embrace. So far as it is agreed and stipulated that any truth or duty shall be sacrificed or neglected, and that any error or sin shall be treated as indifferent or trivial, the essence of latitudinarianism is adopted, room is made for further advancements, and the way is prepared for ascending, through successive generations, to the very highest degree in the scale.”<sup>{286}</sup>

More will be said in the next chapter concerning the interconnect-  
edness of the church because it is in its interconnectedness that the eye  
of man can see much of the unity of the church.<sup>{287}</sup> Yet we must con-  
clude from not only M’Crie, but also the very Reformation itself, that  
interconnectedness is a *demonstration* of unity, not a *means* to unity. If  
local assemblies are not agreed in the Christian faith; if they have dif-  
fering judgments; if they are not of the same mind in the things of

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286. M’Crie, *op. cit.*, 106-14.

287. The practical outworking of this interconnectedness will be discussed in vol-  
ume two of this work, hopefully forthcoming in late 2000 or early 2001, D.V.

Christ then interconnectedness is a façade at best and dangerous to the true faith at worst. The unity of the church is demonstrated primarily as the local assemblies “all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (First Corinthians 1:10).

### *The Elders Sitting as a Court*

The word “church” can also signify a body of Christians in any locality represented in their elders (Matthew 18:17). In the Old Testament, when the elders of Israel met in official *session* (the Latin word for “sitting or seating,” Ezra 10:16; John 11:47; Psalm 107:32; Revelation 4:4), they represented the entire congregation before Jehovah, just as they represented Jehovah and his covenant to Israel. To address the elders of Israel was to address the entire congregation of the Lord. In fact, when these elders met in official session, they could be said *to be* the congregation of the Lord, or the children of Israel representatively (Exodus 3:14, 16, 18; 4:29-31; 19:7, 8).

In Revelation chapters four and five the entire church of Christ is gathered around Christ’s throne in her representatives — the twenty-four elders, i.e., the twelve Old Testament patriarchs and the twelve New Testament apostles. Matthew 18:17 uses the word “church” in this sense, where Christ taught that as a final resort in church discipline, we are to turn a straying member over to “the church,” i.e., to the eldership of the church, for their counsel, ministry, adjudication, and, if necessary, for the excommunication of the offender.

When the apostolic writers of the New Testament sent their letters to the church, they sometimes addressed them to the elders of the church, as representatives of the entire membership, as at Philippians



1:1. Biblical church government, in other words, is representative government, i.e., ecclesiastical republicanism — a congregation governed by elder-representatives, elected by the congregation to *administer* the word of God, but never to legislate for the congregation.

In the paragraphs that follow, I have attempted to bring out the Scottish arguments surrounding Matthew 18:17 being the session acting as the “ministerial church” with the keys. I follow closely Samuel Rutherford’s *A Peaceable Plea for Paul’s Presbytery in Scotland* (1642). Do First Corinthians 5:4 and Matthew 18:15-20, either separately or together, refer to the church consisting of all professors of Christ or only to a ministerial assembly consisting of the church guides or governors (i.e. “elders”) or to some third thing? Presbyterians historically have answered that these passages, dealing as they do with the keys of the kingdom, must refer *primarily* to the elders, for the church of all professors is nowhere in Scripture given the keys of the kingdom to bind and loose. We answer that it must be the elders, for the church of professors is nowhere in Scripture said to “synagogue with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ” to settle authoritatively disputes between brothers or to cast out and “deliver to Satan” for the destruction of the flesh. But the assembly spoken of in Matthew 18:15-20 and in First Corinthians 5:4 has the power to bind on earth and to deliver authoritatively a sinning and convicted church member to Satan. Therefore the assembly spoken of in these two places, as I shall demonstrate by several arguments below, must be the ministerial assembly of those who *do* have the keys to bind and loose and those who *do* have the “power of our Lord Jesus Christ” to deliver church members to Satan, viz. the church guides or governors (i.e. “elders”). Of course, that is not to say that there cannot and should not be a concurrence of the members of the church considered as a whole;

but it is a denial of the keys to the church members as though they could act as private members with the power of the keys.

Let us examine Matthew 18:15-20 together with First Corinthians 5:4 to see what we shall:

First, the language of Matthew 18 alludes to the synod and consistory of the Jews of which Christ's hearers were well acquainted. The terms, "brother, witnesses, synod, assembly, congregation, heathen, and publican" are all terms which were peculiar to the Sanhedrin of the Jews. Thus Theodore Beza commenting on this place maintained, "[we] would understand Christ here to speak of a Christian presbytery, that has power to excommunicate, except we [first] consider that Christ has a respect in this form of speech to the Jews' church polity."<sup>{288}</sup>

Excommunication is expressed in Jewish terms familiar with the synagogue usage of that day, "let him be to thee as a Gentile," i.e. a stranger to the commonwealth of Israel...not one of the visible church of that day. The effect of letting one be as the Gentile was to cast him out of the covenant community — out of the synagogue. The whole congregation of that day did not judge judicial causes and therefore it would be a foreign imposition upon the words to see the church in Matthew 18:17 as consisting of the entire congregation.

Second, the church in a particular place gathers for prayer, preaching, and sacraments, i.e. the worship of God in his appointed way; but not for rebuking or judging. None but pastors, and certainly

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288. Cited in Samuel Rutherford, *A Peaceable Plea for Paul's Presbytery in Scotland* (Dallas: Presbyterian Treasury, 1998 reprint of 1642), 85-92.

none of the women, were to speak in the assembly of all professors (First Corinthians 14:34-35). But rebuking and judicial censuring where there is binding and loosing requires that many others speak in turn, in addition to the pastors. For example, surely the accused — even though it may be a woman — must be able to speak in his or her own defense. This is a basic right which none but the tyrannical would deny. No binding or loosing is possible apart from the testimony of witnesses, so witnesses must be permitted to speak in the assembly spoken of in Matthew 18:17. The offended party (plaintiff) must be allowed to present his or her case, and so speaking must be allowed to the accuser as well. If the scandal should be between woman and woman, and if all the witnesses were women, then it would fall out that the predominant portion of speaking in this assembly could be by women. Therefore the assembly of Matthew 18:17 and the synagogue of First Corinthians 5:4 cannot be the same as the assembly for worship, because different rules apply to each. But if there are different rules for each kind of assembly, then there must be different assemblies in view.

Third, the church spoken of in Matthew 18:17 is a judicial seat and ought to be obeyed in the Lord. This assembly has power to excommunicate. Biblically, however, one man cannot excommunicate another except he be a judge (First Samuel 2:25). The people of the congregation were *required* to hear, i.e. obey or hearken to, the judges.<sup>{289}</sup> The elders are in the place of Christ with respect to judging (Luke 10:16 cp. First Corinthians 5:4). Even in the matter of private and personal discernment the apostle John distinguished between

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289. See Chapter Four, on *Deuteronomy 17:8-13*.

“you” (members) and “we” (elders or church guides).<sup>[290]</sup> But just as one private person cannot excommunicate another church member, neither does he increase his authority or create a power of excommunication by convincing a multitude of other private persons of the supposed righteousness of his cause. Therefore neither one private professor, nor a multitude of private members taken together, has authority to excommunicate apart from warrant from God to bind and loose. The result of the opposite view would be that church governors are under the authority of those whom they govern. But such a thing is ludicrous on the very surface of it.

Fourth, whatever assembly, arguing *a majore ad minore*,<sup>[291]</sup> has the authority to excommunicate also has authority to inflict all censures lesser than excommunication. However, the private members of the church taken together cannot inflict the lesser censures. A woman may not publicly rebuke her husband, no matter if all the assembly agrees with her. A son may not publicly rebuke his father, though all the assembly agrees with him (unless the son is in some other position than a son to do so, in which case wisdom would indicate a necessity to recuse himself from his father’s case in any event). A servant may not rebuke his master, etc. Therefore, those who are under an authority

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290. First John 2:18

291. An argument *a majore ad minore*, or from the greater to the lesser, assumes or asserts that the lesser is related to the greater as a sort of subset. Thus, whatever is true of the entire greater set must be true also of the subset that is a part of it. This differs from the fallacy of composition in that the fallacy of composition asserts or assumes an *identity* rather than a *subsuming* of the subset.

may not authoritatively rebuke those who are in authority over them (First Timothy 5:1, 19-20). Thus it would seem, arguing from the lesser to the greater, that if the assembly of professors does not have the right to rebuke, neither has it the right to excommunicate.

Fifth, those to whom the essence and definition of a “ministerial church having power to excommunicate” belong (understood by the term “church” in Matthew 18:17) are the [few as] “two or three” in verse 20. But an assembly of professors, regardless of how large it may be, does not have the power of the keys of the kingdom bind and loose. Therefore the church of Matthew 18:17 is not a church consisting of a multitude of professors, but one consisting of as few as two or three — though the smaller assembly has the power of binding and loosing in Christ’s name. From this passage it is possible to adduce the definition of a ministerial church, viz. “an assembly that has the power of preaching, of binding and loosing, and so of church censures.” Because of its fundamental power of binding and loosing, this assembly must also have the authority to convene and to summon, to admit and to bar from church privileges, etc.

Sixth, it follows from the fifth argument above that the power of the keys is not given to all professors alike or assembled because such a church is not a ministerial church having the power either to preach or to bind and loose.

Seventh, the practice of the apostolic church was not to complain to the multitude. For example, the household of Chloe, when grieved by some of the other believers at Corinth, complained to Paul (First Corinthians 1:11). Paul did not correct the action of the household of Chloe, but seems to have regarded it as proper. The action of the household of Chloe, then, in “telling the church,” was correctly under-

stood as telling the governor(s) of the church. Rebuke and correction from an authoritative governor(s) was needed. This rebuking authoritatively is given to the eldership (Titus 1:13), but never to all professors. Therefore the rebuking church and excommunicating church must be the church of the elders or the ministerial church.

Eighth, the church in Matthew 18:17 is the assembly of those to whom the keys of the kingdom are given (see Matthew 16:18-19 for the parallel on binding and loosing with the keys). The keys were given to Peter (Matthew 16:19) and then to all the apostles (John 20:21-22). But Christ has not sent every professor or believer to preach or to judge, but only the apostles and elders (Matthew 28:18ff cp. John 20:21-22). Thus not every believer or professor has the keys. This is also the teaching of Theophilact, Chrysostom, Cyril, Augustine, Jerome, and Cyprian on John 20:21, Psalm 44, and in their epistles.<sup>[292]</sup>

Ninth, that objection is weak which maintains that the term “church” is *never* taken for anything but a body of professors or believers. The word, admittedly, is but seldom used for the overseers only, yet Scripture does so in places. This fact is seen best in the letters to the churches at various places in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. It is in this sense only that the “angel” of the church should rightly be called “the address” of the church. God speaks *to* the church *through* the angel of the church. Though the entire church at each place is commended or chided according to Christ’s precepts, yet each church is addressed *through* its minister or angel. Therefore, the angel of each particular assembly must authoritatively deliver the words of Christ to

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292. Cited in Rutherford, *ibid.*

the congregation of professors at each place, though in many instances the assembly of professors consisted of both wicked and righteous together. In the Old Testament the several words we examined in Chapter three above, such as the Hebrew “*qahal*,” and “*edah*,” or the Greek “*ekklesia*,” do sometimes signify princes or rulers, as Psalm 82:1 (*ba`dath-el*); Numbers 35:24 (*ha`edah*); cp. Joshua 20:4; 9:15 (*nsi`ey-ha`edah*); Exodus 20:18-19 cp. Deuteronomy 5:23. Judges and priests in Israel could pass sentence without prior consent of the people. Thus, Deuteronomy 1:16-17 warns the judges of Israel not to respect the person of any and not to fear the face of men. Similarly, Deuteronomy 17:12 indicates that those who had the authority to judge should not be disobeyed. Yet Israel was a nation of “Kings and Priests” to God in those days, as surely as the church is today (Exodus 19:5-6; Psalm 149:1-2).

Tenth, the church that the plaintiff must tell must be one that is empowered by the Lord to admonish, rebuke, or even excommunicate the offending person. However, only the elders are so empowered by the Lord. Those who are over us in the Lord are *also* the ones who admonish us (First Thessalonians 5:12ff.). The elders who *rule* well (First Timothy 5:17) are also subject to rebuke (First Timothy 5:20), but only after due process (First Timothy 5:19). Those who “hear” the elders are “hearing” Christ (Luke 10:16). Therefore it is the ministerial church of elders that is to receive public accusations in an official capacity, and to rebuke publicly and officially, as Titus 1:13 (“wherefore rebuke them sharply”); First Timothy 5:1 (“rebuke not an elder”) cp. vv. 19-20 (“against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses. Them that sin rebuke before all”); 2 Timothy 4:2 (“preach...rebuke”).

Eleventh, if Christ in Matthew 18:17 intended the church of all professors taken together, then a company of professing women and children may censure and even excommunicate their elders. But the consequent is altogether unknown in the word of God. The antecedent must therefore also be false. Private believers, much less women and children, cannot judge the watchmen and those who are *over them* in the Lord. In the Old Testament, prior to the existence of the nation of Israel, only head of families excommunicated.<sup>{293}</sup> The priest(s), not the people, judged the leper.<sup>{294}</sup> In the New Testament, only the Apostles and Elders ordained pastors and officers.<sup>{295}</sup> Further, if the two or

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293. Genesis 21:10-13 “Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, *even* with Isaac. And the thing was very grievous in Abraham’s sight because of his son. And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called. And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he *is* thy seed.”

294. Leviticus 13:3-5 “And the priest shall look on the plague in the skin of the flesh: and *when* the hair in the plague is turned white, and the plague in sight *be* deeper than the skin of his flesh, it *is* a plague of leprosy: and the priest shall look on him, and pronounce him unclean. If the bright spot *be* white in the skin of his flesh, and in sight *be* not deeper than the skin, and the hair thereof be not turned white; then the priest shall shut up *him that hath* the plague seven days: And the priest shall look on him the seventh day: and, behold, *if* the plague in his sight be at a stay, *and* the plague spread not in the skin; then the priest shall shut him up seven days more:”



three witnesses in the passage happen to be an independent church, then the “two or three” in Matthew 18:16 would be the same as the “two or three” in Matthew 18:20. But then the plaintiff would be telling the church in verse 16 before he tells the church in verse 17 and there would be no difference between these things. Thus if the two or three of verse 20 constitute the church of professors, then the order of Christ has been violated. But the matter would have never properly come before the church in verse 17 in such a case because the two or three witnesses did not have the authority to bind and loose, or else verse 16 would be the final step of this process and there would be nobody else to tell in verse 17. This argument demonstrates by the ensuing contradiction that the “two or three” of verse 20 could not be the same as the “two or three witnesses” of verse 16.

Thirteenth, the issue in Matthew 18:17 is not that an assembly of believers be told so that they may believe or worship, but that an assembly of judges be told so that they may judge. It would place too many interpretations on the passage to claim that verse 17 refers *both* to the assembly of professors *and* to the assembly of elders.<sup>{296}</sup> But

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295. Acts 6:6 “Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid *their* hands on them. 1 Timothy 4:14 Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery.”

296. “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture, (which is not manifold, but one,) it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.” *Westminster Confession of Faith* I.9, in *Confession*, 24.

the same Scripture cannot be subject to manifold interpretations. The same assembly to which the plaintiff must give in his complaint, then, is the same assembly which must be heard by the accused. But further, it would be an unfair and tyrannical imposition that a brother should be cast out of the visible church for not hearing and obeying a congregation who are not scripturally *proistameno*i, “over him,” in the Lord.

Finally, the assembly of believers or professors is commanded to “synagogue” for worship (Hebrews 10:25), but the assembly of First Corinthians 5:4 is commanded to “synagogue” for discipline. There was no need for Paul’s “spirit” for professors to meet together for worship (First Corinthians chapters 11 to 14), but such a requirement existed for the assembly which convened in accord with First Corinthians 5:4. If any two or three professors suffice as the church which receives complaints in Matthew 18:17-20, then Christ has not provided a sure way to remove scandals. The plaintiff and defendant are both left not knowing who their judge(s) may be if it were the case that *any* two or three may suffice. Even in a single congregation of professors there may be dozens or scores of groups of “two or three” professors. How many key-bearing churches, then, shall be within the same congregation could only be known by dividing the congregation into groups of two or three.

## 8. PRESBYTERIAN MINIMALISM

### *Constitutional Presbyterianism*

Clearly, the universal church, even as it is considered as “visible,” cannot assemble weekly on the Lord’s Day for worship. Thus, it is primarily in the local congregation, as this dissertation demonstrated in the previous chapters, that the people of God have their greatest visibility before a watching world. However, the question remains as to whether there is any connection between local congregations short of a fully ecumenical (worldwide) gathering. Presbyterians answer that because there is one Lord of the church and thus a single “law of the house”<sup>{297}</sup> that there should be an historical outworking of the unity of the ideal church. They maintain that the unity of the church should not be sacrificed to the plurality or diversity of local congregations, and at the same time, they maintain that the diversity or plurality of local congregations ought not be sacrificed in order to maintain the unity of the church. Just as God is essentially one and his unity does not detract from the plurality of his persons, neither should the unity of the church detract in any way from the plurality of local congregations.

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297. Ezekiel 43:11 “And if they be ashamed of all that they have done, shew them the form of the house, and the fashion thereof, and the goings out thereof, and the comings in thereof, and all the forms thereof, and all the ordinances thereof, and all the forms thereof, and all the laws thereof: and write *it* in their sight, that they may keep the whole form thereof, and all the ordinances thereof, and do them.”

Further, Presbyterians also maintain that this unity is found in Scripture in part in Presbyterian connectionalism — churches connected via courts of those appointed by God and elected by the people as elders (presbyters) in the local churches. As Professor Robert Reymond has properly remarked, “...it is important to note also that New Testament churches were connected or bound together by a common government. The principle of mutual accountability, dependency, and submission among the churches is taught at several places in Scripture,...”<sup>{298}</sup> This Presbyterian connectionalism can be traced in Scripture in either of two ways: either preceptually or developmentally.

### *Preceptually*

The term “church” in the singular is sometimes used in Scripture to signify a number of congregations in a single city or metropolitan area associated together under a common confession and common church government. In Acts 8:3,<sup>{299}</sup> Saul persecuted the church (singular) by entering “every synagogue” (distributively). Additionally, the Westminster “Form of Church-Government” sets forth the argument for several congregations under a single government by means of scriptural examples.

First, it is evident that the church at Jerusalem consisted of more congregations than one. This fact is demonstrated by considering the usage of the terms “church” and “house” for local congregations.<sup>{300}</sup> It is also important to consider the great number of believers in Jerus-

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298. Reymond, *op. cit.*, 900-901.

299. See also chapter six concerning the local congregation and eldership.

alem both before and after the great persecution that took place in Jerusalem and was reported in Acts 8:1ff. Further, there was a large number of apostles and other preachers in the church at Jerusalem, yet each preacher must have preached fairly often as follows from Acts 6:2, "...it is not reason that we [apostles] should leave the word of God, and serve tables." So also, the diversity of language among the believers in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 2:6) argues for more congregations than one.

Yet all the congregations in the city of Jerusalem seem to have been under a single Presbyterial government because the church at Jerusalem is never in Scripture called the "churches" at Jerusalem, but always in the singular number "church."<sup>{301}</sup> Further, the entire church at Jerusalem was governed by elders who acted together in functions of government.<sup>{302}</sup>

This connectional relationship of local congregations via their respective elders we call Presbyterian connectionalism. No local congregation is fully detached from all other congregations unless it is in a remote part of the world. The visible church is a confederacy of local congregations, each with Christ as its head and with Christ as head of them all together (i.e. Christ is king of the church in both a distributive and a collective sense). To demonstrate the unity we have in Christ, and to follow the example of the churches found in Scrip-

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300. See the argument above in chapter six concerning the local congregation and eldership.

301. Acts 8:1; 11:22; 15:4.

302. Acts 11:30 and 21:17ff.

ture, congregations should nurture relationships in as many ways as possible short of the compromise of biblical truth and ethics. As much as possible congregations in the same city should be under a common court of presbyters.

Above or beyond the local or city presbytery, it is also possible and profitable to see how Scripture groups churches together by regions or provinces. Thus Scripture speaks of “the churches of Judea” in Acts 9:31 and Galatians 1:22 and also of “the churches of Galatia” in Galatians 1:2. It may be more proper (i.e. following scriptural language) to refer to “the churches” in the *plural* when referring to all the churches in a region or province, or even in a nation. It would seldom be the case that all the private members of the churches of a region the size of Judea or Galatia could meet together for worship. However, the unity of the church could be set forth as presbyters from an entire region or province met together to resolve issues that the churches had in common. George Gillespie listed eight advantages to such Presbyterial meetings,<sup>{303}</sup> four of which he received from Robert Parker and four of which he added on his own from his knowledge of the Church of Scotland.<sup>{304}</sup> Gillespie stated, in defense of

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303. The Oxford English Dictionary notes the first use of the word “Presbyterian” comes to us from 1641. At that point it came to denote the party of Puritans in the Church of England who favored the church polity of Robert Parker (d. 1614). “Presbyterial” is the word commonly used by the Scots of the seventeenth century when referring to rule by elders or presbyters.

304. George Gillespie, *An Assertion of the Government of the Church of Scotland*, Chris Coldwell ed., (Dallas: Presbyterian Treasury, 1998), 94ff.

meetings of a greater presbytery whose power is superior to that of a single congregation:

“The first distinction is between things which are proper and peculiar to one congregation, and things which are common to many. The former pertains to the particular eldership, the latter to the common eldership.... The second distinction is between congregations ‘which have a competent and well-qualified eldership, and small congregations, who have but a few office-bearers’.... [Third] between the case of right administration and the case of aberration. ‘If particular elderships do rightly manage their own matters of church government, the greater presbytery shall not need for a long time (it may be for some years) to inter-meddle in any of their matters, which we know by experience in our churches.’”<sup>[305]</sup>

These distinctions from Parker are pretty much common to all Presbyterian bodies even to this day. The first distinction involves such cases as ordination, suspension from office, deposition from office, and excommunication. Such subjects do not concern *merely* a single congregation, but all those in the region or “common presby-

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305. *Ibid.*, 94-95. “We know by experience” is Gillespie’s phrase, but it is highly questionable whether we can know anything by experience. What Gillespie seems to have intended, and what he should have said, is that they experienced higher courts not intermeddling in their local churches for many years. It is impossible epistemologically to say that they “knew” anything from that experience, including what may have caused it.

tery” to use Gillespie’s terminology. Thus, too, the readmission of those who had been excommunicated should be a matter for a common presbytery for the *very same reasons*. There are some denominations today who agree with Gillespie that a person should not be cast out of the church apart from the action or at least the permission of the regional presbytery, but seem to have little problem with readmitting them (and, we suppose, their tithes as well) on the basis of a single congregation’s eldership voting to do so.

Fourth, again following Parker, Gillespie stated, “[Parker] makes a distinction between the case of appellation, and the case *de nulla administratione mala praesumpta*. Though the particular eldership has proceeded aright, though it consist of able and sufficient men, and though it be *in re propria*, yet if one think himself wronged, and so appeal, then is it made obnoxious to a higher consistory, for says Parker, as the Council of Sardis ordains, audience must not be denied him who entreats for it.”<sup>{306}</sup> It should be carefully noted here that neither Gillespie nor Parker can be shown to be saying that an appeal from a lesser to a higher court automatically secures to the appellant a new trial.

Rather, a biblical Presbyterianism will review a case on appeal to make certain that no discrepancies exist respecting relevance, fact, or procedure; but for a regional presbytery to retry a case, it must be convinced that the original jurisdiction either consisted of men incapable of judging the matter or that they had improperly assumed a jurisdiction that did not belong to them or that they made a procedural blunder that deprived the appellant of justice. The very advice given by Jethro

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306. *Ibid.*, 95.



to Moses in Exodus 18:18ff. was based on the fact that a single man or court is incapable of judging the *whole* people of God. But if an appeal from a lower court to a higher court is a right and if the appellant's case must be retried in every instance, then there is really no relief for the higher courts. The issue at Exodus 18:22<sup>{307}</sup> was not that the appellant did not like the outcome of the trial. If that were the basis of an appeal, then every case would be worthy of appeal because exactly half the litigants in every case will be displeased with the judgment entered by the court.

The issue in Exodus 18:22 has to do with greater matters and smaller matters. If every small matter could be appealed from judge to judge or from court to court until it got to Moses, then Jethro's solution would have been no solution at all. Though this dissertation will freely grant that Exodus chapter eighteen deals more with civil than with ecclesiastical courts;<sup>{308}</sup> yet when appeal is made to such places as Exodus chapter eighteen to justify our Presbyterian system, we must be sure that we are not twisting Scripture to conform to our system, but rather that we are shaping our system to conform to Scripture. The principle is identical at Deuteronomy 1:15-18. There would be no point in even having a *system* of courts if the lower courts did not have

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307. Exodus 18:22 "And let them judge the people at all seasons: and it shall be, that every great matter they shall bring unto thee, but every small matter they shall judge: so shall it be easier for thyself, and they shall bear the burden with thee."

308. See chapter four for the reason for granting this point. Yet there is no reason to think that both civil courts and ecclesiastical courts may not be in view, since Moses was both a prince and an ecclesiastical elder.

a proper authority to decide cases with finality on the assumption that the cases were not *clave errante*.

The point of having a system of courts in both the Old Testament national church and the New Testament catholic (worldwide) church is based upon the unity of the church. The only way a person in Israel could expect justice in a lawsuit involving a person from a different neighborhood, a different city, a different region, or even a different tribe would be if there were a single court that had jurisdiction over *both* parties to the lawsuit. So today, the only way a truly consistent jurisprudence could exist in the worldwide church would be if a Christian in one congregation could tell a presbytery<sup>[309]</sup> of an offense committed by a brother in a *different* local congregation. Which church court would have jurisdiction in such a matter? Quite simply, the lowest or narrowest or nearest jurisdiction that the two Christians in question have in common.<sup>[310]</sup> If both brothers were in the same local congregation, then the session would have primary jurisdiction. If both lived in the same city, then the city consistory would have primary jurisdiction; if in the same region, then the same regional presbytery, etc.

An approach such as that described in the preceding paragraphs would do violence to no Scripture, yet would maintain all the princi-

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309. “The church” in the context of Matthew 18:17 — See the previous chapter on the local congregation and eldership.

310. Deuteronomy 21:1-9 states that the nearest eldership must accept responsibility when an unknown person commits a crime. By implication, the nearest court would usually be the court of venue.

ples of what we would describe as “Presbyterian Minimalism.” The approach this dissertation describes has the added advantage of being in full conformity to the principle of Deuteronomy 21:1-9. The key features of Presbyterian minimalism are *first*, that the church’s governors cannot rightly impose anything upon the consciences of God’s people save the Word of God alone. Historically this has been known as *jus divinum* Presbyterianism, or even more basically, *sola Scriptura*. *Second*, Presbyterian Minimalism would insist that the lowest presbytery with jurisdiction over two brothers would be the court by which the dispute should be settled. It is not logically “orderly” for two neighbors to have a dispute settled by a *beth din* five hundred or a thousand miles distant from their hometown (First Corinthians 14:40).

This minimalist approach depends to a certain extent upon a presumed unity of the catholic visible church. It should also be observed that such unity is difficult to find in today’s denomination-dominated Christianity. Basically what has taken place in modern Christianity is that men are admitted into office completely or partially apart from their willingness to uphold the doctrinal standards of the church they profess to serve. Private Christians then become alarmed and begin to think, perhaps correctly, that those officers who have so little integrity as to *become* officers in a church whose doctrines they do not believe therefore cannot well serve constitutional justice. Then not only private members, but whole congregations and even groups of congregations splinter off to form new denominations. At that point, church discipline becomes a practical impossibility due to the number of Christians who have *no* jurisdiction or presbytery in common.

It has thus become commonplace throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century for a state of affairs to

exist within Presbyterian denominations in which men who are in disagreement with the standards of their own denominations to be admitted to office. Then those men may later vote in a judicial case contrary to the very standards that they have sworn before God to uphold. Sadly, it is not primarily the liberal denominations that make this their practice. The liberal denominations have *become* liberal because previously conservative denominations practiced a sort of confessional latitudinarianism<sup>(311)</sup> toward its officers, thinking that such latitudinarianism would not matter. The fact that they thought in such a way indicates how *little* of modern Presbyterianism is taken up with biblical jurisprudence and how *much* of it is taken up with matters in which integrity is apparently unimportant. The solution, though it may take long to implement, is for presbyteries to refuse to ordain men who refuse to administer judgment in accordance with the church's standards. A short-term or stop-gap measure would be for churches to require those sitting on *a church tribunal* to promise to judge the particular case strictly in accordance with the standards of the church. If some presbyter were unwilling to make such a promise, whether from conscience or any other reason, the church should refuse to allow him to sit on the tribunal. This would have the added advantage of preventing presbyters who are not committed to the church's confession from changing the confession by judicial fiat.

Someone might object to this scheme that it still would not enable the church to adjudicate disputes among Christians with differing confessions. Of course, the objection's observation is true on the face of

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311. See the chapter on local congregations and elderships for the working definition of "latitudinarianism."

it. We acknowledge that with as many disparate denominations and confessions as presently plague the church that confessional integrity will not resolve all possible disputes within professing Christianity. Yet, it would be a step in the right direction at least to require those within a given denomination to limit themselves to their own confessions. A further unity among the various denominations of Christianity is of questionable value at any rate until such time as they are of the same mind and have the same judgment.

Notably, it was at the “third proposition” of church government that the fragile alliance between English Presbyterians, Independents, and Scots began to fall apart at the Westminster Assembly. The proposition read, “The Scripture doth hold forth, that many particular congregations may be under one Presbyterial government.”<sup>{312}</sup> According to George Gillespie’s notes, Philip Ney [or Nye] together with Thomas Goodwin and Jeremiah Burrowes [or Burroughs] wanted to debate not simply the warrant, but the *jus divinum*, of the question, which could not be done using the phrase “may be.”<sup>{313}</sup> However, the choice of the words was deliberate according to Charles Herle and others in the assembly.<sup>{314}</sup> Thus, according to Gillespie scholar, Professor W.D.J. McKay, the purpose of using the term “may be” rather than “ought to be” or something similar was to give greater

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312. “The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government,” *Confession*, 406.

313. George Gillespie, “Notes of the Proceedings of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster,” 9., in *The Works of George Gillespie*, volume II (Edmonton, Canada: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991 [1846]).

314. *Ibid.*

scope for agreement among the commissioners and members of the assembly. McKay further noted the assembly's "conciliatory spirit" in giving the Independents three weeks to put forward their case against classical presbyteries.<sup>[315]</sup> It is the contention of this dissertation that the view of Presbyterian minimalism presented above and in the pages that follow is perfectly in keeping with the *Form of Church-Government's* third proposition. Presbyterian minimalism is *not* the same thing as Independency. The concept is simply that unless the presbyters who are members of the presbytery are regarded as duty-bound to uphold the church's constitution, they have forfeited the right to sit on any *beth din* of the church. For this reason Presbyterian minimalism may also be termed "constitutional Presbyterianism."

### ***Developmentally***

As D. Bannerman pointed out in his *The Scripture Doctrine of the Church*, the church of the first twelve chapters of the book of Acts clearly *saw* itself as one, *spoke* as one, and to the extent that it had opportunity to do so, it *acted* as one.<sup>[316]</sup> Professor Bannerman stated persuasively, "Nothing comes out more clearly in the early chapters of Acts than the unity of the Church of those days. The fact, and the sense of it which prevailed among the disciples, are alike set forth often and powerfully in the narrative. As already observed, the keynote of this whole first period of the history is the emphatic word

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315. W.D.J. McKay, *An Ecclesiastical Republic: Church Government in the Writings of George Gillespie*, (Edinburgh: Paternoster Press for Rutherford House, 1997), 100-101.

316. D. Bannerman, *op. cit.*, 433.

*homothumadon*, ‘with one accord.’”<sup>[317]</sup> It would be easy, but incorrect, to presume that the unity of the earliest years of the Christian church was due to their lifelong identity as Jews. It was not their status as Jews, but the life of the church *en Christo*, “in Christ,” that brought about both the sense of unity and the ability to speak and act as a single body. Though this theme did not come out fully until the later Pauline epistles,<sup>[318]</sup> Paul encountered the unity of the church — the oneness of believers with Christ and Christ with the believers and hence of the believers with one another — on the road to Damascus. A light that shone so brightly as to make the sun seem dark by comparison appeared and Paul said he “heard a voice, speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou *me*...and he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest” (Acts 26:14-15). Though Saul regarded himself as persecuting the church, the risen Christ characterized Saul’s actions as a persecution of Christ himself.

Further, the Hebrew Christian church acted as a single entity and had or procured the means for doing so. It was not merely an ambiguous *sense* of oneness that animated the church of those days, but the church *acting as one*. The first opportunity that the church had to make a corporate decision was the replacement of Judas Iscariot in the apostolate.<sup>[319]</sup>

Several observations regarding this decision are important for the development of the structure of the church, because one can find the same principles and spirit exemplified throughout the New Testament

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317. *Ibid.* Greek transliterated for consistency with this dissertation.

318. Especially Ephesians and Colossians.

and recorded in the book of Acts. In fact, the number of salient points for church polity in the narrative may even be the primary explanation for the narrative's attention to detail. Five chief points present themselves in Acts 1:15ff. The only point that we would suggest is more the administration of an Old Testament ordinance than a New Testament ordinance may be the casting of lots to determine God's choice. The chief points are: First, that the election is placed not *merely* in the hands of the eleven, but of the whole company of the disciples (or at least of the adult males — thus Peter's address to the *andres adelphoi*, "men-brothers"). Second, after prayer and study of pertinent Scripture, the matter was brought before the assembly by one already in office. Third, there was a clear statement of the purpose of the election and of the proper qualifications for office.<sup>{320}</sup> Fourth, two men were nominated by the company of disciples from among their own number, and were "set forward" by the whole company.<sup>{321}</sup> Finally, the *formal* admission into office is conducted by those already in office

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319. For the purpose of this dissertation, it is assumed rather than proved, that the disciples and apostles in Acts chapter one were doing God's will to select a replacement for Judas. Some have argued that they should have waited for God's choice of Paul in Acts chapter nine. However, in either event, the procedure followed in Acts chapter one does show us a biblical way of handling such matters.

320. *Ten episkopen autou laboi heteros* (Acts 1:20) from Psalm 108:8 (LXX). There (Psalm 109:8 in Hebrew and AV) the Greek *episkope* is used for the Hebrew *p̄qudah*, "office or charge."

321. This is the same Greek term, *histemi*, used in Acts 6:6 for a similar nomination.



and again associated with prayer for divine guidance and blessing.<sup>{322}</sup> The only singularity that confronts us in the narrative is the casting of lots (*edoken klerous auton*). This action of casting lots is never again reported in the book of Acts under that term.<sup>{323}</sup>

The references to the unity of the church in the earliest New Testament documents are also quite impressive in their number. Thus in both First Peter and James<sup>{324}</sup> the old Hebrew idea of the unity of Israel even in the diversity of the twelve tribes of Israel can be clearly seen. The Christian “diaspora,” which began when Peter’s hearers on the day of Pentecost returned to their homes,<sup>{325}</sup> formed “an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, . . . which in time past were no people, but now are the people of God.” They were “living stones,” resting upon the “Lord, a living Stone, rejected indeed of men, but with God elect, precious,” and in him “built up a spiritual house,” and “the house of God.” Believers in

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322. D. Bannerman has an excellent discussion of this election in *op. cit.*, 401-405.

323. The usual phraseology for the casting of lots is *ballein klerous*. Thus, the *giving* of lots rather than the *casting* of lots may have reference to something other than an actual casting of lots into the lap. However, such a study is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

324. These epistles were written to a mixed Hebrew/Gentile audience, but the unity rather than the diversity in the congregation is paramount in each epistle.

325. Compare Acts 2:9-11 to First Peter 1:1ff.

Christ form “the brotherhood,” and “your brethren that are in the world,” and make up “the flock of God.”<sup>[326]</sup>

Organizational unity and names on a roll were not so important to the unity of the church in biblical times as were the facts that the church *acted and thought* as one. Of course, that is not to suggest that either organizational unity or names on a roll were altogether absent from the early church — see, for example, Colossians 4:10. This spiritual unity continued to be manifested in the election of “the seven” in the sixth chapter of Acts.

During the preaching of the gospel in Samaria in the eighth chapter of Acts, the church at Jerusalem sent a delegation either *consisting* of the Apostles Peter and John or at least *led* by them to the founding of the Samaritan church by the gospel. The sending of Peter and John “to inspect, to advise, and to sanction” so important a step as the foundation of a Samaritan church, implied neither jealousy of Philip nor any incompetence on his part. The apostles were the responsible chiefs of the whole body. They were bound to see to its welfare, and in every way to aid its progress.

“It was of the utmost moment that a branch Church, formed among an alien and hostile people, should not fall out of the unity of brotherhood with the mother Church at Jerusalem. Besides, it is plain that the formal recognition of the converted Samaritans, as members of the kingdom of Christ, was expressly reserved for the apostolic deputies. Baptism had put them in the position of the hundred

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326. See James 1:1; 2:1; First Peter 1:1ff.; 1:22; 2:5ff., 9-10, 17; 4:17; 5:2, 9, 14.

and twenty before Pentecost; but the full bestowal of spiritual influence, evidenced by visible or audible tokens like the gift of tongues, took place only when, after solemn prayer for the assembled brethren, Peter and John laid their hands successively on the head of each.”<sup>{327}</sup>

Thus it was that the Samaritan brethren were brought into (or rather kept in) the unity of the church, and that on a footing of full equality with the brotherhood in Jerusalem and Judea.

Similarly, when the gospel crossed another and stronger barrier between Jew and Gentile<sup>{328}</sup> the entire Christian community took up the matter. “Now the apostles, and the brethren that were in Judea, heard that the Gentiles also had received the Word of God” (Acts 11:1). Peter himself came up from Caesarea to Jerusalem to give an account to the whole gathering of what took place in Cornelius’ household. Though the challenge to Peter’s action came from a faction within the church that would later be shown to be in error on some foundational aspects of the gospel, Peter nevertheless submitted to the inquiry as one who was as much subject to the oversight of the presbytery as any other believer or preacher or elder in the church. The result

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327. J. Oswald Dykes, *From Jerusalem to Antioch: Sketches of the Primitive Church*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1858), 263-64.

328. One can see a sort of outline of the book of Acts at Acts 1:8, “...and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” So it is that Acts chapter two begins with a few disciples in a “house” in Jerusalem and concludes with Paul under “house arrest” in Rome, the capital of the world, so to speak.

of the inquiry by the “presbytery of southern Palestine” was that the objectors were (temporarily) silenced. “The Church, as a whole, was fully satisfied with the Apostle’s action in the matter; and the question of the admission of uncircumcised men to the full privileges of the Church, on the conditions of faith and repentance alone, was settled in point of principle.”<sup>{329}</sup>

After Peter’s explanation of his actions respecting Cornelius’ household, the gospel continued to grow. The city of Antioch became an important center of Christianity; containing, it must be, several congregations. There were in the Antiochene presbytery at least five “prophets and teachers.” Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, Manaen, and Saul were all regarded as teachers. It would not be an outlandish or even startling idea, therefore, to suggest that there were in the presbytery of Antioch (at least) five congregations. In the context of a meeting of the presbytery (Acts 13:2), the elders who ministered (*leitourgounton*—“led the worship service”) set apart Saul and Barnabas to the missionary work of carrying the gospel yet farther toward the “uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). After some period of preaching the gospel “to the Jew first and also to the Gentile” (Romans 1:16), once again the specter of the Judaizers arose to trouble the church. The fundamental controversy erupted when “...certain men which came down from Judea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1).

At first, it would seem, those who taught this error did so using a measure of secrecy until they could convince some others of their

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329. D. Bannerman, *op. cit.*, 444.

errors (Galatians 2:4). The detailed narrative in the book of Acts regarding the resultant council together with the characterization of the council in Paul's epistle to the Galatians demonstrate two things. First, they demonstrate the importance of the doctrinal issue and second, they show the importance of "finally deciding" the issue in a Presbyterian way. It is not within the scope of this dissertation's purpose to enter into the actual doctrinal issues. The only bearing that the doctrinal issue has on the subject of the dissertation is to demonstrate or settle the principle under which one is to be regarded as part of the church's fellowship. The movement begun by those whom Paul would subsequently characterize as "false brethren" (Galatians 2:4) actually contained the seeds of a heresy that went to the root of the gospel. Paul declared that all true gospel preachers know "that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even as we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified" (Galatians 2:16).

Therefore, due not only to the foundational nature of the error of the Judaizers, but also because the Judaizers were basically unteachable ("therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them"), it was agreed to refer the matter to a *beth din* that would have jurisdiction over all the parties involved in the dispute. Much has been made by some authors of the fact that the supreme ecclesiastical Sanhedrin of the Jews was located at Jerusalem. Nothing in the context of Acts chapter 15, however, leads us to that conclusion. More to the point, Acts 15:1 teaches that the men who were troubling the Antiochene church were from Judea. Galatians 2:12 indicates that these false teachers (at least claimed that they) came from James at Jerusalem. Following the principle that this dissertation

has elsewhere identified as the second key of Presbyterian minimalism, a court was selected that would be the nearest and lowest that had jurisdiction over all parties to the dispute. The court in question was subsequently convened in the city of Jerusalem. The whole matter was therefore referred to the newly convened *beth din* at Jerusalem once the *beth din* actually was convened. “The brethren [at Antioch] appointed that Paul and Barnabas, and certain others of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question” (Acts 15:2).

Given the fact that with the exception of James the son of Zebedee all the apostles were still living (or at the least there are no reports of their deaths up to that time in the Scriptures), the issue *could* have been resolved by apostolic decree. The fact that the issue was authoritatively settled by a council is quite significant, then, for the church today that is altogether without apostles apart from their inspired writings (Ephesians 2:20). “The office-bearers and members of the Church at Antioch in the first place, and the apostles and presbyters at Jerusalem in the second, were left to act simply as ordinary uninspired Christians are meant to do in like circumstances.”<sup>{330}</sup>

Not only the churches at Antioch and Jerusalem were involved, however. On their way from Antioch to Jerusalem, the company passed through the regions of Phoenicia and Samaria, giving a full account (*ekdiegoumenoi*) of the Gentiles’ conversion. The company of deputies was therefore able to report the response of the churches of Phoenicia and Samaria or alternatively they may actually have brought representatives of the churches with them. At Jerusalem, the

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330. D. Bannerman, *op. cit.*, 560.

host church along with the apostles and elders received a report from Paul and Barnabas “of all the things that God had done with them” among the Gentile converts to Christianity. Either at this public meeting or soon thereafter the Judaizing party entered a protest. Their protest, in substance, was to what Paul and Barnabas had *not* reported, for the Pharisee party wanted to teach new converts, “it was needful to circumcise them, and to charge them to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:3ff.). Thus the very question that would otherwise have come by way of reference from the Presbytery of Antioch came instead as a complaint from the Pharisee party of the Presbytery of Jerusalem. Thus, a *beth din* consisting of office-holders was convened to “consider of this matter.”

The passage in Acts 15 does not explain how long it was from the time the complaint was first entered until the council actually convened. Paul, however, informs us in Galatians 2:2-10 that some private conferences took place before the council actually met.<sup>(331)</sup> At those conferences, Paul laid before the “pillars” the gospel he preached to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:7ff.), perhaps entering into explanations not so suitable for a non-theological audience of private church members. The result was that James, Cephas, and John became

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331. Discerning readers will note that the author of this dissertation has adopted the harmonization of Bp. Joseph B. Lightfoot in his *Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians*, 123ff. F.F. Bruce, in his excellent life of Paul, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, seems to be of the opinion that the conferences in Galatians 2:2-10 took place in conjunction with Paul’s visit to Jerusalem at Acts 11:27-30. With all due respect to Dr. Bruce, this author finds Lightfoot’s arguments more compelling.

convinced that the gospel Paul preached was, in fact, the true gospel. As a result, they prepared to guide the council in the right direction (Acts 15:22, 25-27). An unknown number of private church members were present at the meeting, both in the deliberations and as witnesses to the final decision. The statement in Acts 15:12 that “the multitude kept silence” intimates two things: first that such proceedings should not be behind closed doors or in “executive session,” and second that the multitude should have no actual voice in such deliberations. It should be noted, however, that “the whole church” gave concurrence (Acts 15:22ff.) to the judgment of the elders and apostles and thus perhaps gave additional weight to the verdict. Professor Bannerman pointed out the manner in which the meeting proceeded, which is also instructive to the position of Presbyterian minimalism.

“The discussion was summed up, and the arguments already adduced by the apostle of the circumcision and the representatives of the Gentile Churches were confirmed by James the Lord’s brother. He proved from the Old Testament Scriptures that God had *designed* from the beginning that the Gentiles should be included in His Church, even as he had *shown* this in the case of Cornelius, to which Peter had referred. James ended with a wise and temperate proposal as to the form which the decision of the council should take. This was agreed to, with the addition, — suggested possibly by the deputies as a step which would greatly conduce to peace among the brethren at Antioch, — that they should not merely send a letter, but an influential deputation from Jerusalem, to explain and enforce the decision by the council by word of mouth.<sup>{332}</sup> The resolution which the representatives of the



apostolic Church, ‘having come to one accord,’ unanimously adopted, was to this effect: It ‘vindicated the truth of the gospel,’ which Paul preached, and the freedom of the Gentile converts in all essentials. It laid no new burden upon them as necessary to salvation or to Church fellowship. But it asked them meanwhile to forbear from three things the use of which jarred greatly upon the feelings and associations of Jewish Christians, — from ‘things sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled.’ To these things a fourth was added, not in itself indifferent, like the rest, but counted so by public sentiment among the Gentiles in that age, and inextricably mixed up with their heathen worship and idolatrous feasts, namely fornication.”<sup>{333}</sup>

While this author finds himself in disagreement with Dr. Bannerman on the final point of his summary, he finds the summary itself generally in agreement with the principles of Presbyterian minimalism. There was not a frivolous appeal from the decision of a lower assembly to a higher one. Rather, a court was determined to be the court of original jurisdiction that would also have authority over all the disputants in the case. The case reached the higher court, or rather it was designed originally that it would reach the higher court by way of reference from a lower court, and not by way of a disgruntled party

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332. One might be inclined to remember the Old Testament church’s “officers” at this point. See chapter four.

333. D. Bannerman, *op. cit.*, 563-64.

to an original dispute. Thus this fits perfectly with this dissertation's earlier explanation of Deuteronomy chapter seventeen and with the Old Testament view of ecclesiastical government expounded in chapter four of this dissertation. Second, we should note in light of Presbyterian minimalism that the delegates to the *beth din* did not bring a bushel basket of unrelated business with them. They came to consider one matter and that matter was strictly ecclesiastical and it was strictly judicial in nature. There were no resolutions condemning Caesar for worldliness or making claims about women in the Roman army. Nor were there any requests for a centralized missions budget. There were no committee reports because (and this is lost on most of modern Presbyterianism) *there were no committees*. Finally, note well that at the conclusion of the court, it simply adjourned. There was no resolution to meet the following year in Antioch, nor did they erect an *ad interim* commission to handle judicial matters between meetings. Fellowship and worship took place at times and in venues appropriate to each. Judicial business only was transacted and at the conclusion of the meeting there appears to be a tacit understanding that *that court's* business was finished. Should the need arise, another court of similar jurisdiction and authority would *then* be convened. What is *certainly* missing is an accusation that Paul was not a Presbyterian because he made no commitment to return the following year.

This doctrine of Presbyterian minimalism fits in also with the famous seventeenth century book on the subject, *Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici*. In Part II, Chapter 15, the authors wrote on the subject of the subordination of particular congregations to greater assemblies. The arguments of the ministers in that chapter are of an uneven quality, some of which (e.g. the argument from Matthew 18:17) seem to this author to commit the fallacy of *petitio principii*, or

assuming the conclusion of an argument in different words in the premise of the argument.<sup>{334}</sup> Nevertheless, Presbyterian minimalism does not deny a proper and biblical subordination of lesser assemblies to greater assemblies. It sets forth, just as does Acts 16:4 that a biblical finding by a broader or higher or greater assembly is binding upon a narrower or lower or lesser court under its jurisdiction. Thus this dissertation, its author, and the principles of Presbyterian minimalism are all in agreement with the six principles of subordination set forth by the *Jus Divinum* for the subordination of particular assemblies to greater assemblies as classical or synodic presbyteries. We agree with the Presbyterian ministers, when they allowed, “1. It is not denied that particular churches have within themselves power of discipline entirely, so far as any cause [case] in debate particularly and peculiarly concerns themselves, and not others.”<sup>{335}</sup> Nor does Presbyterian minimalism conflict in any way with the second rule laid out by the London ministers. “2. It is granted that where there is no *Consociation*, or *neighborhood* of single Churches, whereby they may mutually aid one another [that] there *a single Congregation* must not be denied *entire jurisdiction*; but this does not falls [sic] within the compass of *ordinary rules of Church-government* left us by Christ. If there is but one Congregation in a kingdom or Province, that *particular Congre-*

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334. Technically, *petitio principii* is not a logical fallacy, since every proposition implies itself. It simply has no compelling force as an argument. It is essentially a tautology.

335. Ministers of Sion College (London Provincial Assembly), *The Divine Right of Church Government*, (Dallas: Naphtali Press, 1995 [1646, 54]), 237. Hereafter *Jus Divinum*.

*gation* may do much by itself alone, which it ought not to do where there are neighboring and adjacent Churches that might associate therewith for mutual Assistance.”<sup>[336]</sup> The London ministers have not yet detailed what they think a particular congregation may or may not do if it finds itself physically or otherwise isolated from like-minded churches. Notably, however, the Westminster Assembly’s *Form of Presbyterial Church-Government* makes a similar statement specifically regarding ordination of ministers.

“In these present exigencies, while we cannot have any presbyteries formed up to their whole power and work, and that many ministers are to be ordained for the service of the armies and navy, and to many congregations where there is no minister at all; and where (by reason of the publick troubles) the people cannot either themselves enquire and find out one who may be a faithful minister for them, or have any with safety sent unto them, for such a solemn trial as was before mentioned in the ordinary rules; especially, when there can be no presbytery near unto them, to whom they may address themselves, or which may come or send to them a fit man to be ordained in that congregation, and for that people; and yet notwithstanding, it is requisite that ministers be ordained for them by some, who, being set apart themselves for the work of the ministry, have power to join in the setting apart others, who are found fit and worthy. In those cases, until, by God’s blessing, the aforesaid difficulties may be in some

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336. *Ibid.*, Underlining is italics in original.

good measure removed, let some godly ministers, in or about the city of London, be designed by publick authority, who, being associated, may ordain ministers for the city and the vicinity, keeping as near to the ordinary rules fore-mentioned as possibly they may; and let this association be for no other intent or purpose, but only for the work of ordination.”<sup>{337}</sup>

The third rule of the London ministers was as follows: “3. It is granted that every *single* Congregation has *equal power* one as much as another. According to that trite and known axiom: *Par in parem non habet imperium, i.e., An equal does not have power or rule over an equal. Prelatical subordination*, which is one or more Parishes to the *Prelate* and his *Cathedral* is denied. All particular Churches being *collateral* [are] of the same authority.”<sup>{338}</sup> Once again, there is nothing in this principle in itself that is in any way in conflict with Acts 15 or with Presbyterian minimalism. The church at Antioch did not send word to the bishop(s) at Jerusalem so that they might get the word from a cathedral church to a parish church. Rather, a court was established and convened as churches at a parity with one another came together to resolve a problem they had in common. If ever there was a time when it would be possible to send to a single bishop [i.e. an apostle] for a ruling on a matter, it would have been when the apostles were yet living. But if in that case it was neither necessary nor expedient to do so, then much less should we expect churches to apply to so-called bishops in Rome or any other city for rulings in such matters.

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337. “Form of Presbyterial Church-Government,” *Confession*, 415.

338. *Jus Divinum*, 237. Underline is italics in original.

Fourth, the London ministers allowed the rule that a classical assembly or synodic assembly cannot biblically require anything of a lower assembly except that which is an application of Scripture to the given exigencies. They stated in their fourth rule, “4. It is granted that *Classical* or *Synodical* authority cannot — by Scripture — be introduced over a particular Church in a *privative* or *destructive* way [as if it is] that power which God has bestowed upon it; but contrarily it is affirmed that all the power of *Assemblies* which are above *particular Congregations* is *cumulative and perfective* to the power of those inferior *Congregations*.”<sup>{339}</sup> This rule is based on the ethical authority of the fifth commandment, in which we learn that the sins of superiors are, “...commanding things unlawful, or not in the power of inferiors to perform; counseling, encouraging, or favoring them in that which is evil;...”<sup>{340}</sup>

The fifth rule of the London ministers is the one perhaps most often violated by modern-day so-called Presbyterians. “5. It is granted that the highest Ecclesiastical Assembly in the world cannot require from the lowest an *absolute subordination, and pro arbitrio*, i.e., at their own mere will and pleasure, but only [*subordination*] *in some respect*. *Absolute* subordination is only to the Law of God laid down in Scripture. We detest *popish tyranny* which claims a power of giving their will for a Law. It is [merely] *subjection in the Lord* that is pleaded for. We affirm [that] the straightest *rule* in the world, except the Holy Scripture, is *regulam regulatam*, i.e., a rule to be regulated;

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339. *Ibid.*, 238.

340. Larger #130, *Confession*, 215.

Peace being [found] only in walking according to Scripture Canon (Galatians 6:16).”<sup>{341}</sup>

The Jerusalem council in Acts 15 did not quote historical testimony; it did not quote inspired tradition; it did not quote a pope or the rules of the elders. Though the council was made up in part of apostles, nevertheless the delegates believed themselves compelled to cite Scripture if there was something that they would impose upon the lower court(s) of the church. When the council stated “It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us,” they referred not to private opinions, nor to historical testimonies. Rather, they referred to the Holy Ghost speaking in the inspired words of the prophet Amos, whom James quoted as president of the council in Acts 15:16ff. It was strictly because the *dogmata* of the Jerusalem council were based upon Amos 9:11-12 that they could rightly send them to the churches *for to keep* (Acts 16:4).

This consideration of delivering decrees *for to keep* brings us to the sixth and final rule of the London ministers in *Jus Divinum*. “6. Nor is it the question whether *Charitative, Consultative, Fraternal, Christian Advice, or Direction* is either to be desired or bestowed by neighboring Churches either apart, or in the *Synodical* meetings, for the mutual benefit of one another, by reason of that holy Profession in which they are all conjoined and knit together. For this will be granted on all hands, though when it is obtained it will not amount to a sufficient Remedy in many Cases.”<sup>{342}</sup>

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341. *Jus Divinum*, 238. Underline is italics in original.

342. *Ibid.*

Again, this dissertation points out that Presbyterian minimalism agrees with the London ministers who wrote the *Jus Divinum*. Significantly, however, in the opinion of this dissertation’s author, the so-called Presbyterian Church in America is on the verge of denying this principle of the Presbyterian understanding of church government. The *Proposed Statement of Identity for the PCA* states, “Our description of session, presbyteries, and the General Assembly as ‘church courts’ tends to place the emphasis on judicial matters and rules of procedure rather than on worship, fellowship, and ministry.”<sup>[343]</sup> What the *PSI* desires, according to its own supporters, is for the Assemblies of the church to become organs for “charitative, consultative, fraternal, Christian advice, or directive” interaction among the churches, but as the London ministers pointed out — “when it is obtained it will not amount to a sufficient remedy in many cases.”<sup>[344]</sup> George Gillespie must again be consulted on this matter, for he spoke to the argument of the *PSI* as though he were living today:

“To the last answer, it is certain that the conclusion of that meeting at Jerusalem was not a naked council and advice, but a decree imposed with authority upon the churches (Acts 15:28; 16:4; 21:25). And whereas it is affirmed,<sup>[345]</sup> that the decree was merely apostolical, and that the elders did no more than consent thereto, even as the brethren did, this is manifestly against the text; for

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343. *PSI*, 17.

344. *Jus Divinum*, 238.

345. In John Robinson’s *Justification of the Separation*, 266.



(Acts 16:4), it is said of Paul and Silas, ‘As they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem;’ and (Acts 21:25), all the elders, speaking to Paul, say, ‘As touching the Gentiles which believe, we have written and concluded that they observe no such thing.’ That this was spoken by all the elders is plain from v. 18-20. So then the elders did decree, ordain, and conclude these things to be imposed upon the churches of the Gentiles, and not the apostles only. Now the elders of the church of Jerusalem had no authority to impose their decrees upon all the churches of the Gentiles, with whom they had nothing to do, as Mr. Robinson says truly. Since, therefore, these things were imposed upon the churches of the Gentiles as the decrees ordained by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem, this does necessarily import that there were in that meeting, delegates and commissioners from the churches of the Gentiles which did represent the same.”<sup>{346}</sup>

Presbyterian minimalism, then, far from *denying* or even *minimizing* the authority of the broader assemblies actually affirms their authority in a way that modern Presbyterianism does not. Rather than making the broader assemblies mere conferences at which the “preacher guild” assembles for rest and relaxation, Presbyterian minimalism restores the broader assemblies to their proper and rightful place according to Scripture. Nearly all meetings of the broader

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346. Gillespie, *Assertion*, 126.

assemblies would be “called” meetings in the sense that there would not be standing committees with ongoing business. When the presbytery actually had something biblical to do, such as examining candidates for the ministry (First Timothy 4:14) or adjudicating disputes (Acts 15:2ff.), meetings could be called for that purpose. The churches that sent delegates would have a voice in the outcome, but all the affected churches would be bound by the vote (Acts 16:4). Modern Presbyterian denominations, regardless of their names, are not operated and shepherded by assemblies of elders chosen by the people. Instead, they are massive bureaucracies built upon a sort of business model of church government in which the assemblies of elders become little more than an annual “stockholders’ meeting.” By reducing the work of the church’s assemblies to that work prescribed in Scripture, it would again become possible for the assemblies of elders to do the work of the church rather than turning the work over to permanent or standing committees for which there is neither precedent nor precept in Scripture. It is the strong conviction of this writer that when God’s shepherds return to doing God’s work in God’s way that there will be a revitalization of the whole church, from the believer in the pew to the broadest assemblies of the churches.<sup>[347]</sup>

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347. It is the intention of the author to follow this volume on the philosophical, biblical, and theological foundations of church government with a second volume dealing with the actual “mechanics” of God’s *jus divinum* ecclesiastical government.

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