

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Imperious Presbyterianism

Kevin Reed

Editor's Foreword

Authoritarianism is an expression of the sinful nature of fallen man. It finds expression in families and businesses, but most cruelly in churches and governments. It is lording it over one's fellow men – hence the English House of Lords, for example – but it is explicitly forbidden by Christ to his disciples. It is the "Gentiles," not the Christians, who exercise dominion over their fellow men. "Dominion Theology," influential in some Reformed and Charismatic churches, fails to understand Genesis 1:28, which does not even mention dominion over men.

Today, authoritarianism pervades the professing churches, from the absolute monarchy of the Roman Catholic Church-State, with its nobility of bishops, to the local Charismatic church that teaches submission and the local Baptist church that has only one pastor and no elders – all are in disobedience to Christ.

This sinful authoritarianism has also entered the "conservative" Presbyterian churches, and it is based on the same doctrinal errors that led to the formation of the Roman Church-State 1500 years ago. In this essay, Kevin Reed traces the historical and doctrinal roots of Imperious Presbyterianism, and calls Bible-believing Presbyterians to correct the errors of their authoritarian elders.

Imperious Presbyterianism

In recent years there have been several unhealthy trends among American Presbyterians. I am not talking about the old mainline denominations that long ago abandoned both Presbyterian doctrine and polity. No, I am speaking about "conservative" Presbyterians, some of whom now trumpet their commitment to "historic Presbyterianism," even as they undermine some of the basic principles of the Presbyterian system of government.

I wish to discuss several distortions of Biblical church government under a general theme which I will call

Imperious Presbyterianism. Specifically, in this critique, we will examine some specific errors regarding the nature of the church, the ministry, ecclesiastical authority, and church membership.

The Nature of the Church

We begin with the case of a group of Christians who are unable to find a sound church in their vicinity. They may be recent converts; or, they may have embraced Reformed convictions that make it impossible for them, in good conscience, to remain within existing, questionable churches in their community.

This small band of Christians begins to meet together for worship. Among those who learn of the fledgling congregation are some Imperious Presbyterians. These Imperious Presbyterians may live nearby, or they may actually be hundreds of miles away (distance makes little difference to Imperious Presbyterians, since they feel free to intrude upon the activities of others).

Instead of being encouraged in their efforts to establish a sound church, members of the fledgling congregation soon begin hearing disparaging remarks. The criticisms may come in the form of open denunciations from an imperious pastor; or they may circulate through whispered innuendo, repeated by members of dubious churches nearby. Regardless of the means, the substance of the disparaging remarks is the same: "How can they be a real church, if they don't have a pastor or elders?" Or, "How can they be a legitimate church? They aren't under the authority of church officers or a presbytery."

Such comments reflect a wrong view about the nature (or being) of the church; they represent a grave departure from the Scriptural teaching of the Protestant Reformation – which is ironic, since Imperious Presbyterians often cast themselves as the modern proponents of Reformed ecclesiology.

The Essential Nature of the Church

At the outset of any discussion about the church, we need to be clear about certain distinctions. The Bible commonly uses the term *church* in various ways: The word can refer to individual (visible) gathered congregations (*Acts* 14:23, 27; *Romans* 16:5; *1 Corinthians* 1:2-3; 4:17; 11:18; 16:19; *2 Corinthians* 1:1-2; *Colossians* 4:15); the collective visible congregation (*Acts* 7:38; *1 Corinthians* 10:32; 12:28; 15:9; *Galatians* 1:13-14; *1 Timothy* 3:5; *1 Timothy* 3:15); or the elect of God – the “invisible church” (*Hebrews* 12:22-24; *Ephesians* 1:22; *Colossians* 1:18).¹

It is the specialized usage of the term in reference to the *visible church* that concerns us here. What is the essential nature of this church? The Scripture speaks of “the church of the living God” as “the pillar and ground of the truth” (*1 Timothy* 3:15). Thus, Protestant and Reformed authors often speak of the Gospel as the essential mark of the church. The Gospel is the *sine qua non* of the church: the one element without which an assembly cannot be a legitimate church of Jesus Christ. The true church bears the Gospel of Christ; if an organization ceases to maintain the Gospel, it is no church of Christ, but an assembly of some other nature.

James Bannerman summarizes this view:

There can be no doubt that Scripture represents the one great object of the establishment of a Church in the world to be the glory of God, in the salvation of sinners, by means of the publication of the Gospel. For this end the Church was instituted at first; for this end it continues to exist from one generation to another; and it is only in so far as it accomplishes this one grand object of its existence, that it serves the proper and primary purpose of a Church at all. Judging then, by this first test, we are warranted in saying, that to hold and to preach the true faith or doctrine of Christ is the only sure and infallible note or mark of a Christian Church, because this is the one thing for the sake of which a Church of Christ has been instituted on Earth. A true faith makes a true Church, and a corrupt faith a corrupt Church; and should it at any time apostatize from the true faith altogether, it would, by the very act, cease to be a Church of Christ in any sense at all. The Church was established for the sake of the truth, and not the truth for the sake of the Church.²

Consistent with such views, the visible church has been defined in the *Westminster Confession* (25:2-3) as “those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children.” This definition rests upon the Protestant distinction between the “visible church” (those professing true religion) and the “invisible church” (the elect), already noted

1 For a more complete discussion, see William Cunningham, *Historical Theology* (1862; Banner of Truth, 1979), Volume 1, 12-20; James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (1869; Banner of Truth, 1960, 1974), Volume 1, 5-17.

2 James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, I, 59.

in the first section of chapter 25 of the *Confession*.

Years ago, I encountered a professing Presbyterian who denied the distinction between the visible and the invisible church. This man subsequently apostatized and embraced Roman Catholicism, which is certainly nearer to his conception of the church.

Now, I doubt there are many professing Presbyterians who, if pressed, are willing to completely abandon the distinction between the professing visible church and the invisible church of the elect. Nevertheless, there is one aspect of the Romanist view of the church which seems to be finding currency among contemporary Presbyterians, although in a slightly modified form. It is a position which *defines the visible church in terms of the officers of the church*.

The Errors of Cyprian and Imperious Presbyterians

In the early centuries of post-apostolic history, the church was faced with organizational challenges of how to relate to heretics and “lapsed” Christians. In this context, a view which gained wide acceptance was to define the true church as consisting of only those members who were in communion with an orthodox bishop. This was the teaching of Cyprian, and it bears a striking resemblance to the position of the Imperious Presbyterians of our day.

It is clear that Cyprian was infected with erroneous notions about priestly functions belonging to the bishops. Nevertheless, such priestly claims were not unique to Cyprian; rather, his distinct “contributions” to patristic ecclesiology are his theories regarding *the definition of the church* and *church unity*, drawn from his views of the bishop’s office. Arthur Cushman McGiffert summarizes the teachings of Cyprian:

The bishop owes his appointment to God, not man. He is wholly independent both of clergy and laity and his sovereignty is absolute. To be sure, Cyprian consulted freely with his clergy and strove as far as possible to meet the wishes of his people; but in the last analysis he was supreme and insisted that all should recognize his supremacy. In the controversy with certain of his clergy concerning the treatment of the lapsed it was their defiance of his authority that chiefly incensed him. In his emphasis upon episcopal authority he went so far as to insist that the church is founded on the bishops and that apart from them there is no church. Thus he says: “Thence through the vicissitudes of time and succession the ordination of bishops and the business of the church move on, so that the church is founded on the bishops and every act of the church is governed by these same rulers.” And again: “Whence you ought to know that the bishop is in the church and the church in the bishop, and that if anyone is not with the bishop he is not in the church.”³

3 Arthur Cushman McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York, 1933), II, 29. For a parallel source of the quotations from Cyprian, see *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 5 (Hippolytus, Cyprian,

This is the crucial error that is of interest to our present discussion: *the definition of the church in terms of her officers, and those in communion with such officers.* “The bishop is in the church and the church in the bishop, and that if anyone is not with the bishop he is not in the church.” This notion led to a corollary teaching concerning the *unity of the church*:

The unity of the church...was so important to Cyprian that he published a treatise on the subject, the most famous of all his writings, titled *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*. This one Catholic church is not a mere community of Christians, it is the sole ark of salvation outside of which no one can be saved. “If anyone could escape,” Cyprian says, “who was outside the ark of Noah, he also may escape who is outside the church.” “Outside the church there is no salvation.” “He cannot have God as father who has not the church as mother.”

The difference at this point between Cyprian and earlier Christians was not that he asserted that no one could be saved apart from the church, for upon this there was general agreement from primitive days, but that he identified the church with a particular institution, the Catholic church, which was founded upon and had its existence in those bishops who held their office in regular succession from the Apostles. This church alone, he claimed, was in possession of saving grace and apart from it there was no salvation. Apart from it indeed there was no church and there were no Christians. It was to be sharply distinguished from all heretical and schismatic bodies, from all other so-called churches which claimed to be Christian but were not. Irenaeus had declared that the bishops as successors of the Apostles are the guarantors and interpreters of apostolic truth and that those who do not accept the truth taught by them are heretics and beyond the pale of salvation. Cyprian went further and asserted that even though they may be orthodox they cannot be saved unless they are within the one Catholic church. In other words, schismatics cannot be saved any more than heretics. Indeed, schismatics are heretics, for they do not accept the true church, belief in which is itself an

Caius, Novation; 1886, and various reprints; Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, editors). There the citations are translated: “Thence through the changes of times and successions, the ordering of bishops and the plan of the Church flow onwards; so that the Church is founded upon the bishops, and every act of the Church is controlled by these same rulers” (page 305). “Whence you ought to know that the bishop is in the Church, and the Church is in the bishop; and if any one be not with the bishop, that he is not in the Church, and that those who flatter themselves in vain who creep in, not having peace with God’s priests, and think that they communicate secretly with some; while the Church, which is Catholic and one, is not cut or divided, but is indeed connected and bound together by the cement of priests who cohere with one another” (374-375).

essential part of the Christian faith.⁴

At the time of Cyprian, the primacy of the Roman bishop was not generally accepted. Indeed, as McGiffert notes, Cyprian held that the unity of the church was vested “not in any single bishop but in the collective episcopate.” Thus, the “unity of the church finds its legitimate expression in ecclesiastical synods in which the collective episcopate declares its will.”⁵

In subsequent times, the idea shifted within Western Christendom to identify the church with those in communion with the bishop of Rome. While this marks a significant alteration, it still rests on the assumption that membership in the true church is dependent upon one’s relationship to an ecclesiastical officer. For this reason, historians have observed that “in a very true sense Cyprian was the founder of the [Roman] Catholic church.”⁶ Or, as William Cunningham expresses it, Cyprian “brought out, for the first time, with anything like clearness and distinctness, the idea of a catholic church, comprehending all the true branches of the church of Christ, and bound together by a visible and external unity. This was Cyprian’s grand contribution to the progress of error and corruption in the church, and the ultimate growth of the Papacy....”⁷

To recap, we are dealing with errors respecting both the nature and unity of the church, and this combination is similar to the notions currently promulgated by Imperious Presbyterians. In some respects, the modern error may be closer to Cyprian than to the later assertions of Rome, since Presbyterians do not advocate papal supremacy. Nevertheless, Romanists and Imperious Presbyterians share a common belief that the legitimacy of a church is dependent upon some class of church officers. Let us explore this issue more fully.

The Church and the Ministry

At the time of the Reformation, Protestants uniformly rejected Romish notions regarding the nature of the church. To state the issue succinctly, William Cunningham notes:

Papists used to lay down this position: Where there is not a valid ministry, there is not a true church; and the Reformers answered them by laying down this counter-position: Wherever there is a true church, there is, or may be, a valid ministry.... The Popish position virtually proceeds

4 McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*, II, 30-31. In this section, McGiffert references Cyprian’s *De catholicæ ecclesiæ unitate* and *Epistles*. For a parallel source of the quotations from Cyprian, see *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 5: “If anyone could escape who was outside the ark of Noah, then he also may escape who shall be outside the Church” (423). “...there is no salvation out of the Church...” (384). “He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother” (423).

For another succinct summary of Cyprian’s conception of the church, see Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (1937; Banner of Truth, 1969, 1975), 228-229.

5 McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*, II, 33.

6 McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought*, II, 34.

7 Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, I, 169.

upon the assumption that the church is for the sake of the ministry, and the Protestant one upon the assumption that the ministry is for the sake of the church. The Church of Rome makes the ministry the end, and the church the means; Protestants reverse this order, and make the ministry the means, and the church the end.⁸

This is a crucial distinction, and it holds important ramifications concerning the ministry in relation to the legitimacy of a church. As Cunningham notes:

The bearing of this relative position of the ministry and the church – the ministry being for the sake of the church, and not the church for the sake of the ministry – upon the principles discussed between the Reformers and the Church of Rome, is obvious enough. If this principle be true – and the Scripture plainly enough supports it – then these two inferences may be deduced from it: First, that the question, whether any particular company or society of professing Christians be or be not a true church, *should take precedence* of the question, whether or not they have a valid ministry? Secondly, that the Scripture not having explicitly asserted, or afforded any adequate ground for believing, that a valid ministry, or any specific feature in or about the ministry, is an essential mark of a true church, we are entitled, upon the ground of this general principle, positively to aver, that no inference drawn from the subject or character of the ministry can be of itself, and as a general rule, *conclusive* upon the character and standing of the church.⁹

Moreover, these principles hold implications for the formation and governance of congregations which are isolated or exist in troubled times. As Cunningham adds:

Protestants regarded not only the Pope, but even the lawful, *i.e.*, regular pastors, as not being an *essential* feature of the church, of such intrinsic and paramount importance as to form an indispensable part of the standard by which to settle at once and conclusively, in all circumstances, whether a particular society of professing Christians did or did not form a church of Christ. The Reformers did not admit that this principle was inconsistent with the

doctrine of the divine institution of the Christian ministry, or with the obligation incumbent upon professing Christians to be in communion with a regular congregation under the superintendence of a pastor, and of a pastor, if possible, appointed in the ordinary, regular, prescribed way, – *i.e.*, by ordination conferred by those who were pastors before. But they held that, as the means are in some sense to be regarded as subordinate to the end, and as there may be occasionally, in particular circumstances, when perfect regularity in regard to outward arrangements is impracticable, or virtually so, a reference to the end rather than to the means, as the guiding and higher standard, it followed that these two practical conclusions might be deduced from it: First, that the absence of a regular ministry, appointed in the ordinary prescribed way, or even the absence of a ministry altogether for a time, is not necessarily, and in all circumstances, a sufficient proof of itself that a society of professing Christians is not a church of Christ: and secondly, that any company of faithful or believing men is entitled to a ministry, since Christ has given the ministry to the church; and if they are so placed in providence that they cannot have a ministry in the ordinary, regular, prescribed way, are entitled to make a ministry for themselves, and that that ministry, though not a regular, is a valid one.¹⁰

The Being and the Well-Being of the Church

Before leaving this discussion about the nature of the church, it is appropriate to express the distinction between the *being* and the *well-being* of the church. We've seen that the one essential thing necessary to the being of a church is the truth about Jesus Christ – the Gospel. Thus, a congregation may be without a pastor, other officers, and the regular ordinances for a time, but still retain the essence of a church. Nevertheless, that is not to say that the ministry and ordinances are expendable; rather, they are necessary for the *well-being* of the church. As Bannerman states:

[W]hat are those things which, unlike the truth, have been instituted for the sake of the Church, and not the Church for the sake of them? Such, unquestionably, are the ordinances, office-bearers, and discipline which have been established within a Christian society. These being instituted for the advantage and edification of the Church, are, from their very nature, subordinate and secondary to the truth, for the holding and publication of which both they and the Church itself exist. They may be necessary, and are necessary, for the perfection of the Church, but they are not necessary for its existence. They can not be accounted fundamental, in the sense that without them it would cease to exist as a Church at all. The single thing essential to the being of a Christian

8 Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, I, 27-28. Cunningham makes his observations in his consideration of the teaching of the *Westminster Confession* (25:2-3): "The visible church, which is also catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, together with their children.... Unto this catholic visible church Christ has 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 does by his own presence and Spirit, according to his promise, make them effectual thereunto."

9 Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, I, 28-29.

10 Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, I, 30-31.

Church on Earth is the faith or doctrine of Christ. According to the distinction already laid down, for this thing the Church was instituted, and not this thing for the Church.

Other things, such as sacraments and ordinances, the ministry, and the outward administration of the Church, are not essential to it, but only accidental; they are necessary for its well-being, but not for its being.¹¹

This distinction between the *being* and the *well-being* of the church is important. It dispels the claims of both Papists and modern Cypranite Presbyterians, who seek to unchurch people not under the jurisdiction of their favored ecclesiastical officers. Moreover, the distinction between the being and well-being of the church is vital for another reason. To say that certain things are not *essential* to the being of the church is not to say that they are totally *irrelevant* to the health of a church. Indeed, some items crucial to the well-being of the church tell against both the Papists and Imperious Presbyterians. In this light we turn to the “marks of a church” as found in numerous Reformed confessions.

The Marks of the Church

At the time of the Reformation, the Protestant creeds often treated the marks of the church.¹² These creeds were formulated against the background of the Papal Church, which claimed to be the only true church. Roman Catholic apologists often produced lengthy lists of the “marks” by which the true church could be discerned.¹³ Of course, these lists are long on prescriptions that predispose the case in favor of Rome, and lacking those considerations which expose Romanism. The most glaring omission from Popish lists is the Biblical Gospel.

Protestant confessions acknowledge “marks” that include: the preaching of the Gospel, the correct administration of the sacraments, and the right exercise of church discipline. In a strict sense, these marks may be viewed as an extension beyond what is absolutely necessary to the being of the church. But in another sense, they simply provide a practical measure for evaluating the competing claims between Rome and the Reformed Churches. Who really possesses the characteristics most consistent with the Biblical church? If a particular congregation has not only the essence of the Biblical church (the Gospel), but also exhibits other characteristics necessary for the well-being of the church (the true sacraments, and discipline) – then that church stands out in sharp relief against Rome, which has corrupted all three elements by embracing a false Gospel, idolatrous worship, and corrupt discipline.¹⁴

11 Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, I, 59-60.

12 See the *Confession of the English Congregation at Geneva* (1556), the *French Confession* (1559), the *Scottish Confession* (1560), and the *Belgic Confession* (1561).

13 See Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, I, 20-26; Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, I, 54-68.

14 Generally speaking, Lutherans stress the *word* and *sacraments* in their discussions about the marks of the church (without insisting on discipline, as the Reformed creeds). Nevertheless, when

In other words, the Protestant creeds provide good pastoral advice for any age. Are you confused about which church to join? Then look for these characteristics (if you can find them): the Gospel preached in purity, the sacraments administered rightly, church discipline exercised properly. If you find these characteristics, you can rest in good conscience, knowing that you have found a genuine assembly of Christ’s people, and not a counterfeit such as Rome.¹⁵

But sometimes these characteristics are not easily seen. As the *Westminster Confession* notes, churches are “subject both to mixture and error” (25:5) and “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.” Some dubious assemblies may be in declension (toward further apostasy, becoming “synagogues of Satan”); others may be on a slow, but irregular path to reformation. Still, if the status of a particular congregation is not clear, believers are not obliged to join it. Rather, they should seek an assembly where the marks are obvious; or they may help to form a Gospel church in which their consciences, shaped by God’s word, may be satisfied.

The Reformed creeds provide useful measures, and by these measures Imperious Presbyterians are often found wanting. Some Imperious Presbyterians are joined to denominations which fail to uphold the Gospel against subversions of the doctrine of justification. If the one essential mark of a true church (the Gospel) is being undermined within their denomination, then by what right do such men denounce others for seeking refuge in another congregation (even a fledgling assembly, without a fully-formed government)?

Some Imperious Presbyterians are known for high-handed and arbitrary uses of church discipline. What is the status of a congregation that doles out ecclesiastical discipline in a tyrannical manner? Such an assembly is unhealthy or corrupt, regardless of whether it has an outward form of

speaking of the irreducible mark of the church, Luther himself speaks only of the Gospel: “Wherever this Gospel is truthfully and purely preached, there is the kingdom of Christ; and this mark of the church or the kingdom of Christ cannot deceive you. For wherever the Word is, there the Holy Spirit is, either in the hearer or in the teacher. External works can deceive, since after all they are found even among the heathen. Therefore the papacy errs in holding that there are marks of the church other than the Word.... For the Word has ever been the one constant and infallible mark of the church.” Again, “The only mark of the Christian Church is following and obeying the Word. When that is gone, let men boast as much as they please: Church! Church! There is nothing to their boasting anyway. Therefore you should say: Do the people have the Word of God there? And do they accept it too? ... Wherever one hears the Word of God, there is the church of God, though it be in a cow stable, the place where Christ was born” (Citations 778 and 780, from *What Luther Says* [Ewald M. Plass, ed., St. Louis: Concordia, 1959], 264).

15 It is significant that the *Scottish Confession* of 1560 (chapter 18) speaks of the notes of the visible church as possible even among Christians who are reduced in number to merely two or three: “Wheresoever then these former notes are seen, and of any time continue (be the number [of persons] never so few, about two or three) there, without all doubt, is the true kirk of Christ: who, according to his promise is in the midst of them....”

Presbyterian polity. In such cases, would church members be well-advised to join with the Imperious Presbyterians? Or would they be better advised to join in efforts to establish a more consistent Gospel church?

Let us return to fledgling congregations. They may not have a complete or mature ecclesiastical organization, but that does not mean they are not genuine churches. If that were so, then mission congregations (both home and abroad, including some described in the New Testament) would be “unchurched.” The fundamental question is whether these congregations maintain the true Gospel, not whether they possess particular church officers. Again, as noted by James Bannerman, “the term *Church* is frequently employed in Scripture to denote the body of believers in any particular place, associated together in the worship of God.”

Even in the case of two or three professing Christians, met together for prayer and worship, whether publicly or in private houses, the term ἐκκλησία is applied to them in the New Testament; and that, too, before such a congregation might be organized, by having regular office-bearers and minister appointed over them. In the *Acts of the Apostles* we are told that Paul and Barnabas “ordained them elders in every Church” as they journeyed through Lystra and Iconium and Antioch [Acts 14:23]—language which plainly recognizes the congregation of professing believers as a Church, even previously to the ordination of office-bearers among them. The body of believers in any particular place associating together for worship, whether numerous or not, have the true character of a Church of Christ.¹⁶

Moreover, a forming congregation may possess the additional marks of the well-being of the church, albeit in an irregular manner. A fledgling congregation may rely on visiting preachers and advice from Gospel churches in distant places. Administration of the sacraments may be infrequent, being conducted by visiting ministers on occasional opportunities. Nevertheless, the preaching of the Word and administration of the sacraments are present and valid, even if less frequent than desirable.

Thus, while a forming congregation may lack complete organization and officers, it may also lack something else: the errors and corruptions of the Imperious Presbyterians who denounce them. Measured in this way, a fledgling congregation may exhibit the marks of the church more clearly than a doctrinally dubious congregation that has a more extensive formal organizational structure.

The Nature of the Ministry

Another error of Imperious Presbyterians is a distortion regarding the nature of the ministry (or church office). To Imperious Presbyterians, the essence of the ministry is *authority*. Notice how this error follows naturally from their erroneous view of the church. If the church cannot exist without the ministry (or officers), it follows that authority becomes the defining feature of the ministry in relationship

to church members.

Let me provide a couple of illustrations. Suppose the case of a man with Reformed convictions, living in a city where there is not a sound church. He begins studying the *Westminster Confession*, together with several other men who live nearby. About this time, the group is confronted by an Imperious Presbyterian “pastor” who tells the men they should not be engaged in a group study of the *Confession*, because they are not under the supervision of elders.

In another situation, consider a man who is a member of a church run by an authoritarian pastor. The man is troubled by the direction of the congregation, and has a difference of opinion with the pastor about a key issue facing the congregation. The man receives an angry rebuke from an elder, because he will not obey his “father”—a pointed rebuke meant to reinforce the duty of members to respect the pastor as an ecclesiastical “superior” (see *Westminster Larger Catechism* 124) — as if the mere appeal to authority should settle the matter.

What is the problem in such cases? Simply put, it is a distortion of the Biblical idea of ecclesiastical office.

The Biblical Emphasis for Church Officers

The Biblical emphasis *for* church officers is *service*: an idea that is reflected in the English term *minister*. Hence, also, it is a “true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desires a *good work*” (1 *Timothy* 3:1).

Of course, the greatest example of this principle is the Lord Jesus himself, who “made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a *servant*” (*Philippians* 2:7). Everywhere Christ “went about *doing good*” (*Acts* 10:38). Further, he taught his disciples that “you should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If you know these things, happy are you if you do them” (*John* 13:15-17). To underscore the matter plainly, the Lord charged his disciples:

You know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many [*Matthew* 20:25-28; compare *Mark* 10:42-45; *Luke* 22:23-27].

Similarly, the example of the Apostle Paul is one of service. He labored unceasingly, under great hardships, yet exclaimed that he would “very gladly spend and be spent” for the sake of the churches under his care (2 *Corinthians* 12:15).

Authority and Service

These observations are not meant to infer that there is no legitimate authority held by the officers of the church. Indeed, proper authority is necessary in order to fulfill the work associated with the offices. Nevertheless, Imperious Presbyterians seriously err in their emphasis by behaving as if *authority* is the essence of ecclesiastical office, rather than *service*.

16 Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, I, 11-12.

Sadly, there is a Scriptural example pertaining to the distorted outlook of the Imperious Presbyterians. It is Diotrephes, who loved “to have the preeminence” (3 John 9) and abused his position to thwart the Apostle John. It is a tragic case when men in our day, professing to be Presbyterian pastors, exhibit more of the spirit of Diotrephes than of the Spirit of Christ and Paul.

Ecclesiastical Authority

The previous discussion about church officers makes it appropriate to add some additional comments about ecclesiastical authority. Legitimate authority is granted to *empower service*; this principle follows from our previous observation that *the essence of office is service*. Therefore, men who are selected as church officers are *delegated* a measure of authority sufficient to carry out their assigned tasks. It also follows that their authority is *limited in scope* to the authority which is necessary to discharge the duties associated with their office.

Authoritarian Presbyterianism

We previously mentioned a couple of examples wherein Imperious Presbyterians sought to “pull rank” on church members by rebuking men for commencing a study of the *Westminster Confession*, or telling a church member to obey the pastor as his father. Additional illustrations of authoritarian behavior may be considered.

What should we think if a minister takes action against a member of his congregation, because the pastor objects to the size of the house the member is building? Or, how should we regard the action of a pastor and elders if they announce (without previously consulting the congregation) that the church is selling its property and relocating? How should members react, if pastors exert pressure upon single women in their churches, advocating courtship (or marriage) to men in other congregations or faraway places? (We are not speaking of helpful social networking here, but of the use of pastoral authority to bring added force to the courtship “suggestions.”) What notions of ecclesiastical authority give rise to such actions?

The Limits of Ecclesiastical Authority

It is crucial for both officers and members to realize that ecclesiastical authority is *derived* (ministerial) and not *original*. It is *delegated*, *specific*, and not *discretionary*. In past centuries, Presbyterians struggled against monarchs who asserted the *divine right of kings* – a doctrine which placed the king above the law and rendered his subjects subservient, without the right to question the king’s actions. Nowadays, Imperious Presbyterians extol the virtues of their Reformed forefathers, while they simultaneously erect a doctrine of the *divine right of church rulers*. They claim more than the *divine origin* of the Biblical offices of the eldership and deacons (a valid precept of Presbyterianism); rather, they behave as if church officers have a *broad, discretionary power* over ordinary members, who have no right to question the actions of their leaders.

As noted, genuine authority is granted to *empower service*. Truly, men cannot do their work unless they are given the authority necessary to carry out the tasks assigned to them. But it also follows that the authority of office is limited to the power necessary to discharge the duties – the specific

authority needed to complete the labors associated with their office.

Ministerial authority is delegated by God. Because this authority is a derived power, it is *restricted to a limited range*. To use a Biblical illustration, Paul speaks of his ministerial office as an *ambassador* (2 Corinthians 5:20; Ephesians 6:20). What is an ambassador? An ambassador is a delegated spokesman, charged with a message that has been entrusted to him; he does not have the freedom to modify policy, whether independently or in conjunction with other ambassadors. His office is not a kingly or legislative office. Thus, a pastor or elder is a legitimate messenger for God, only insofar as he accurately bears the message of Christ, who is the King. This is what is meant, when we say that ecclesiastical office is *ministerial* and *specific*.

Samuel Miller has stated the matter this way:

Of this body [the church], Christ alone, as before intimated, is the Head. He only has a right to give laws to his church, or to institute rights and ordinances for her observance. His will is the supreme guide of his professing people; his word their code of laws; and his glory their ultimate end. The authority of church officers is not original, but subordinate and delegated: that is, as they are his servants, and act under his commission, and in his name, they have power only to declare what the Scriptures reveal as his will, and to pronounce sentence accordingly. If they attempt to establish any other terms of communion than those which his word warrants; or to undertake to exercise authority in a manner which he has not authorized, they incur guilt, and have no right to exact obedience....

And, as all the power of the church is derived, not from the civil government, but from Christ, the almighty King of Zion; and as it is purely spiritual in its nature and sanctions; so the power of the church officers is merely *ministerial*. They are, strictly, *servants*, who are to be governed, in all things, by the pleasure of their employer. They have only authority to announce what the Master has said, and to decide agreeably to that will which he has made known in his word. Like ambassadors at a foreign court, they cannot go one jot or tittle beyond their own instructions. Of course, they have no right to set up a law of their own. The Bible is the great statute-book of the body of which we speak; the only infallible rule of faith and practice. And nothing can be rightfully inculcated on the members of the church, as truth, or demanded of them, as duty, but that which is found in that great charter of the privileges as well as the obligations of Christians.¹⁷

In some situations, pastors and elders also serve in a *judicial capacity*, when it is necessary to settle doctrinal or moral cases arising within the church. Nevertheless, when

17 Samuel Miller, *An Essay, on the Warrant, Nature and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder, in the Presbyterian Church* (New York: Jonathan Leavitt; Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1832), 17, 25.

fulfilling judicial functions, their jurisdiction and actions are still limited. They are to rule upon cases according to the Word of God. This principle is illustrated by the Jerusalem Council, where the apostles and elders based their decision upon God's written word in *Amos 9:11-12* (as cited in *Acts 15:16-17*). Judicial functions are not legislative functions, and church officers overstep their bounds if they attempt to "legislate from the bench."¹⁸

In a masterful essay on "Church Power," William Cunningham discusses the binding and loosing power of church officers, and the lawful scope of their decisions. Regarding church censures, he makes the following observation:

What connection have they, in any sense, with opening or shutting the kingdom of heaven? We answer, – They have the same connection and bearing as the word in a certain class of statements has. Exclusion by a judicial sentence from the visible church is just in substance a solemn declaration by the ecclesiastical office-bearers, that they regard the party whom they exclude as maintaining opinions or pursuing a course of conduct opposed to the Word of God; ... such as ought to be felt by men as a call upon them to examine the matter with the utmost care and attention, that they may thus either, on the one hand, see their error and repent of it; or else, if they take the responsibility of disregarding the sentence, may be very confident, and may be able to assign good grounds for their confidence, that they can appeal from an earthly and fallible, to a heavenly and infallible, Judge. To entitle a sentence or a decision upon any spiritual or ecclesiastical matter even to this measure of attention and deference, two things are necessary: First, That it *profess* to be founded upon the Word of God, the only law by which the affairs of Christ's church ought to be regulated; and, secondly, That it be pronounced by persons who are invested with the power of the keys, that is, with the right of ordinarily administering the affairs of Christ's church, and transacting its ordinary necessary business according to His Word. Any sentences or decisions professing to regulate or determine ecclesiastical questions, and not answering to these two conditions, should be at once set aside, as not entitled even

18 Elsewhere I have summarized this point as follows: "When the courts of the church convene, they function *judicially*. They are *courts*; they are *not* ecclesiastical congresses assembled to enact churchly legislation. Their function is to adjudicate matters based upon Biblical law. As judges, the elders are not free to decide cases according to personal whim or the feelings of a moment. Rather, the elders must render judgment according to the principles of God's Word. This is precisely what the apostles and elders did in *Acts 15*. Based upon God's written word in *Amos 9:11-12* (cited in *Acts 15:16-17*), the heretical doctrine of the Judaizers is repudiated. The decrees of the assembly are derived from the Scriptures" (Kevin Reed, *Biblical Church Government* [Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, expanded edition, 1994], 28).

to examination.¹⁹

Cunningham links his comments on this subject to the teaching of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter ... of synods and councils. He observes that the narrow compass of ecclesiastical power applies "not merely to ecclesiastical censure, but to the whole of the powers and functions exercised by ecclesiastical office-bearers, and to all the judgments or decisions pronounced by them in the exercise of these powers."²⁰ Thus, the following principles apply to "all the judgments and decisions of ecclesiastical office bearers":

First, That unless they are consonant with the Word of God, they are of no force or validity whatever, – are not ratified by God, – and are entitled to no reverence or submission whatever from men; while, of course, the principle that God alone is Lord of the conscience implies that men are entitled to judge for themselves, upon their own responsibility, whether they are consonant with the Word of God or not; secondly, That such judgments and decisions, when professedly regulated by the Word of God, and pronounced by competent parties – that is, by ecclesiastical office-bearers – are entitled to a careful and respectful examination; and, thirdly, That when accordant with the Word of God, men, in dealing with and submitting to them, and in their whole views and feelings with respect to them, ought to be influenced not only by a regard to their actual accordance with the Word – though that is the main point – but also, in addition, by a recognition of God's arrangement in establishing the ordinance of church government, and of its right and efficient working as a divine ordinance in the particular case under consideration.²¹

Later in his discussion, Cunningham makes pointed remarks to contrast Popish and Protestant notions of ecclesiastical authority:

The great distinction between the views of the Romanists and the Reformers as to the principles that ought to regulate the execution of these functions was this, that the former assigned to ecclesiastical office-bearers a magisterial or lordly, while the latter ascribed to them only a ministerial authority in the execution of the functions entrusted to them; and the general idea involved in this distinction was this, that while the Romanists assigned to them a large measure of power to be exercised very much according to their discretion, the Reformers – at least Calvin and his followers, for

19 Cunningham, *Discussions on Church Principles: Popish, Erastian, and Presbyterian* (Edinburgh, 1863), 245.

20 Cunningham, *Discussions on Church Principles*, 245.

21 Cunningham, *Discussions on Church Principles*, 246.

Luther and his followers never altogether escaped from the contamination of some lax Popish notions upon this subject—deprived them of all real discretion in the administration of the affairs of the church....²²

Cunningham provides an important clue to help us assess modern-day authoritarian Presbyterians. It is a relatively simple measure: whether men believe church officers possess a lordly power over the members and business of the church. When professing Presbyterian elders or ministers behave as if they possess broad discretionary power, they demonstrate that they have become more influenced by Romish errors than by the historic Reformed teaching based upon the Scriptures. Moreover, like the Papists, they are usurping the authority which belongs to Christ alone.

In his two-volume work, *The Church of Christ*, James Bannerman summarizes the narrow scope of church power.²³ In speaking of how ecclesiastical authority is limited by the authority of Christ, as the Head of the church, Bannerman states:

This ... limitation very clearly points to the character of the power vested in the office-bearers of the Church as entirely subordinate and ministerial, and bounded, as respects its authority and obligation, by the institution and rule of Him who has appointed it. It excludes the possibility of that power becoming an independent despotism or lordship in the hands of the rulers, and of their regarding it as if it were given for their own aggrandizement and exaltation, or to be used for the subjugation, by a spiritual tyranny, of the consciences and understandings of the other members of the Church. Because limited by the authority of Christ, that power can never become independent itself, or make the administrators of it independent. They are, in the strictest sense of the terms, the ministers or servants of Christ.²⁴

At this point, it may be appropriate to add a passing comment about the use of the word *father*, in connection with pastoral relationships. Yes, it is true that the apostles sometimes speak of their parental love toward members of various churches, referring to the members as *children*. But this is an affectionate analogy, based on the role that the apostles had in being the human instruments of bringing people to the faith. Hence, we find expressions like that in

22 Cunningham, *Discussions on Church Principles*, 249.

23 According to Bannerman, church power is limited (1.) "by the nature of it as distinctively and exclusively a spiritual power"; (2.) "by the source of it, or by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church, from whom it is derived"; (3.) "by the rule prescribed for its exercise, or by the Word of God"; (4.) "by the subjects of it, or by the rights, privileges, and liberty of the Christian people." See Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (1869; Banner of Truth, 1960, 1974), I, 247-248.

24 Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, I, 247.

Galatians 4:19: "My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you" (compare *1 Thessalonians* 2:7,11). Such parental affection is altogether different than the authoritarian style of Imperious Presbyterians, who show little affection or parental travail toward the common church membership. Moreover, our Savior stated, "Call no man your father upon the Earth: for one is your Father, which is in Heaven" (*Matthew* 23:9); the Lord's statement should settle any question about the propriety of using the term *father* in reference to the pastoral office.²⁵

At first glance, this quibble over the term *father* might seem to be a diversion from our main subject, unless we realize that it is quite telling, with respect to the attitude of many Imperious Presbyterians. Unlike ecclesiastical authority, parental authority is quite broad and discretionary. Within his home, a father makes all kinds of decisions that affect every member of his household. As long as a father maintains general Biblical principles, he can give his children detailed directives, and he is still within the bounds of his God-given authority. But the lines of authority for ecclesiastical officers are drawn much more narrowly; and if church officers exceed those bounds, then they are usurping an authority that is not theirs.

Is it any accident that false and corrupt churches, such as Rome, routinely use the term *father* as a title for their spiritual leaders? It fits their notion of hierarchy and authority. So why would contemporary Presbyterians employ this terminology? Could it be an indicator of just how much these men have abandoned the principles of the Bible? Perhaps it's just a coincidence, but there is also an increasing number of Presbyterian ministers who are donning clerical collars, like Anglicans and Romanists. Perhaps this is fitting as a sign of the times.

Church Membership

Church members are not drones; church membership is not serfdom. As noted earlier, church members do not exist for the sake of the ministry.

We could say many things about duties of church members.²⁶ In this essay, however, we are dealing primarily with questions of authority. Yes, members should be

25 There is, of course, one passage which seems to speak of treating elders as fathers, *1 Timothy* 5:1-2 state: "Rebuke not an elder, but entreat him as a father; and the younger men as brethren; the elder women as mothers; the younger as sisters, with all purity." In this context, the reference to elders seems to be a reference to older men, just as the "younger men" and "elder women" refer to other groups based upon age and gender within the church, irrespective of office. It is a reasonable expectation that Christians should show proper respect to their elders; but that does not mean that anyone is beyond exhortation or correction if they are erring in some way. Indeed, later in the same epistle, Paul states that elders who sin are to be publicly rebuked (*1 Timothy* 5:20); and, in that context, the reference to elders is a specific reference to church officers.

26 Samuel Miller has an excellent exhortation to church members about their duties with respect to their elders. See the conclusion of chapter 9 in his *Essay, on the Warrant, Nature and Duties of the Office of the Ruling Elder, in the Presbyterian Church*. Of course, such exhortations presuppose a legitimate calling, and the proper exercise of authority by those who hold office.

respectful toward lawful church officers, but they still should retain a Berean spirit. Church members ought to “receive the Word with all readiness of mind,” and “search the Scriptures daily,” to test whether the things they are being taught are really so (compare *Acts 17:11*). It would hardly seem necessary to belabor this point with Protestants, were it not the case that some contemporary Presbyterian ministers and elders seem to think that they only need to “pull rank” in order to settle a disputed point with members of the church. James Bannerman notes:

[M]embers and office-bearers of the Church are mutually entitled to give as well as to receive advice and counsel; and that those in office are bound to give all due weight to the opinions of the membership, so as, if possible, to bring about a mutual understanding and agreement.²⁷

Such comments reflect the responsibility of individual believers to exercise discernment. This idea is rooted in the very idea of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

Indeed, the Lord Jesus himself indicates that one mark of the elect is their ability to distinguish the voice of the true shepherd from the counterfeit calls of strangers and hirelings:

[T]he sheep hear his voice: and he calls his own sheep by name, and leads them out. And when he puts forth his own sheep, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers.... All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them [*John 10:3-5, 8*].

The Lord’s teaching makes it clear that those who cannot (or will not) exercise discernment give reason to question whether they are truly the sheep of Christ. The followers of Jesus are expected to test the spirits of those claiming to be spokesmen for Christ: “Try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world” (*1 John 4:1*). How can they do this, if they owe implicit obedience to persons merely claiming a position of ecclesiastical authority? Truly, believers are enjoined to search the Scriptures, in order to assess the claims of those who profess to speak for Christ, knowing full well that there are many pretenders who run where they are not sent. And ministerial counterfeits are not the only concern; there are *pseudo-brethren* (*2 Corinthians 11:26*) as well as *pseudo-apostles* (*2 Corinthians 11:13*);²⁸ there are counterfeit congregations which say they are churches, but are not: “synagogue[s] of Satan, which say they are Jews,

27 Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, I, 242.

28 This would be a more literal rendering of the Greek terms used in *2 Corinthians 11:13* and *11:26* (ψευδαδελφοίς, *pseudo-brethren*; ψευδαπόστολοι, *pseudo-apostles*). The common English translation renders these terms “false brethren” and “false apostles.” They are indeed false; but, as the context makes clear, they are *pretenders* – false apostles and false brethren masquerading as genuine apostles and genuine brethren.

and are not” (compare *Revelation 3:9*).

With such principles in mind, we return to the great Protestant Confessions. Why did the Reformers include the sections on the marks of a true church, unless they expected people to use those marks as a means for personal evaluation? I contend that this personal responsibility is precisely why such sections are in the great creeds of the Reformation: *The Reformers expected individual believers to exercise discernment*.

Consider the forceful words of the *Scottish Confession*:

Because that Satan from the beginning has labored to deck his pestilent synagogue with the title of the kirk of God ... it is a thing most requisite that the true kirk be discerned from the filthy synagogue, by clear and perfect notes, lest we, being deceived, receive and embrace to our own condemnation the one for the other.²⁹

What is the point of such a declaration, if men are not expected to exercise discernment in order to distinguish the true church from a false church? According to the *Scottish Confession*, we risk “our own condemnation” if we are careless in this regard. Yet, some modern pseudo-Presbyterians attempt to bind church members to dubious ministers and apostate denominations on the grounds that church members do not have the right (individually) to exercise such discernment.

The present writer was once told, by a church officer, that a session might lead their congregation out of a bad denomination; but, otherwise, church members did not have the individual right to make such a decision; members must remain in submission to their rulers. Oddly, in this case, it is not clear why the decision of local rulers is inherently more binding than that of the broader denominational rulers since presbyteries and synods in Presbyterianism are generally viewed as possessing an appellate authority above a local session. So what if a church member is forced to choose between following the decision of his local elders, and remaining loyal to his denomination? If he does not have the right to exercise individual discernment in the first place, how is he to evaluate the competing claims for his loyalty?

The Reformers acted upon the principle that the people did have the obligation to exercise discernment and to depart from corrupt churches. Calvin argues that Rome’s corruption of the Gospel and worship requires faithful Christians to withdraw. Even if there are no Protestant churches in their community, people should not attend the corrupt services of Rome, but withdraw to their homes in order to worship the Lord free from the Romish pollutions: “[W]ould to God they had the courage to gather in the name of Jesus Christ wherever they are, and set up some sort of church, either in their houses or in those of their neighbors, to do in their place what we do here...”³⁰

29 Chapter 18, “Of the Notes by Which the True Kirk is Discerned from the False and Who Shall be Judge of the Doctrine”; spelling modernized.

30 *Come Out From Among Them: “Anti-Nicodemite” Writings of John Calvin*. Dallas: Protestant Heritage Press, 1999, 192.

Calvin's exhortation reaches to the heart of the issue in this way: There are times when it becomes necessary for believers to band together and form a congregation, rather than remain within congregations which manifest grave deficiencies. This is not schism; it is not rebellion. Schism and rebellion are rooted in a revolt against legitimate authority. Therefore, if the officers of an apostate assembly seek to bind members to a church and its corruptions, these officers have reached beyond legitimate authority and are simply usurpers. In this case, the reply of sincere believers ought to mirror that of the apostles to the ecclesiastical despots of their day: "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, you judge.... We ought to obey God rather than men" (*Acts* 4:19; 5:29).³¹

In our day, believers are sometimes told that they should remain in a particular denomination (or local church), contrary to their consciences with respect to certain beliefs and practices. Perhaps a believer is troubled to learn that his denomination tolerates a false Gospel message (such as a corruption of the Biblical teaching on justification); or he is subjected to pollutions of worship being introduced within the church; or he discovers that his congregation is being governed by a company of men who exhibit bad character. After raising the issue(s), this ordinary member is told that it is not his place to meddle in such affairs; and that he must remain obedient to the decisions of his elders (and, of course, continue tithing to the church). If he decides to leave, then he is accused of rebellion, schism, and sedition.

The charge of schism in such cases is particularly appalling when it is made by men who profess to adhere to the Westminster Standards, for the *Westminster Confession* contains a notable statement on liberty of conscience that utterly dispels these authoritarian notions:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in any thing, contrary to His Word; or beside it, in matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also [Chapter 20, section 2].

In speaking of the need for individual discernment, we are not denying the collective or corporate dimension of spiritual discernment. Indeed, we hold that congregational discernment is a reflection of the spiritual state of the members as a whole. Individual discernment and congregational discernment are interrelated.

In his epistle to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul solemnly charges the churches, warning them: "But though we, or an angel from Heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach

any other gospel unto you than that you have received, let him be accursed" (*Galatians* 1:8-9).

Paul's admonitions to the Corinthians strike a similar vein. A problem existed in Corinth because the congregation demonstrated a shocking lack of discernment in its willingness to tolerate the purveyors of false doctrine. Paul flatly states the problem: "I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ. For if he that comes preaches another Jesus, whom we have not preached, or if you receive another spirit, which you have not received, or another gospel, which you have not accepted, you might well bear with him" (*2 Corinthians* 11:3-4).

How does Paul respond to this negligence of the Corinthians? He exhorts them further: "Examine yourselves, whether you be in the faith; prove your own selves" (*2 Corinthians* 13:5). In other words, the failure of the Corinthians to act in a discerning manner was a reason to question their commitment to the Christian faith – individually and collectively. In a pastoral way, Paul probes the legitimacy of their profession of faith; and, by extension, their collective standing as a Christian church is also being probed. After all, if the primary mark of a church is its commitment to the Gospel, and an assembly abandons that commitment, it is no longer "the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (*1 Timothy* 3:15). Congregations that give place to doctrinal deviation run the risk of being disowned as churches of Christ – of having their candlestick removed (*Revelation* 2:5).

Paul's rebuke of the Corinthians underscores a corollary principle. The false teachers were not the only ones guilty of sin; the Corinthian members were also culpable, because they empowered the counterfeit leaders by tolerating them. The Apostle John strikes a similar theme when he writes, "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that bids him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds" (*2 John* 10-11). If it is a sin to aid and abet such pretenders, then church members (both individually and collectively) are responsible to exercise discernment, and to act upon their findings. It is simply untrue to assert that it is not the place of ordinary church members to assess their elders.³²

³² It is also true that elders – in their service within sessions, presbyteries, and broader assemblies – have the obligation to exercise discernment, and to oppose men with erroneous beliefs and practices. "Lay hands suddenly on no man, neither be partaker of other men's sins" (*1 Timothy* 5:22). Sadly, in contemporary American Presbyterianism, very few ministers (individually) or presbyteries (collectively) take substantive action against men with heterodox views within their own denomination. This reality may be one of the disheartening factors that discourage members from their duties. After all, if the presbytery won't remove ministers with deviant views and practices, what can the "average member" do about it? Thus, false leaders disperse their pollutions within the denomination, facing no significant opposition from either members or other church officers. Scarcely anyone, at any level, assumes responsibility for his own failure to exercise discernment and take action.

³¹ See Christopher Goodman's provocative work, *How Superior Powers Ought to be Obeyed of Their Subjects: and Wherein They May Lawfully by God's Word Be Disobeyed and Resisted* (1558), based upon these texts in the book of *Acts*. Goodman was co-pastor with Knox in the English Congregation at Geneva.

Conclusion

We have been examining contemporary errors regarding important ecclesiastical issues: the nature of the church, the nature of the ministry, ecclesiastical authority, and church membership. We have focused upon the abusive tendencies of those we have styled *Imperious Presbyterians*. We might also have referred to them as *Authoritarian Presbyterians*, given their preoccupation with control over ordinary church members, and their abuse of ecclesiastical authority.

In our discussion of Imperious Presbyterians, we have made no attempt to cover many broad (and worthy) subjects related to church government. Yes, essays could be written about the duties of church members, the importance of the ministry, the role of presbyteries, and other kindred topics. These other topics are important, but they cannot be considered correctly, if they are treated without due regard to foundational principles of the church and the ministry.

We are living in a time of widespread apostasy. Therefore, we have given particular attention to Biblical principles of polity that should guide believers, “in particular circumstances, when perfect regularity in regard to outward arrangements is impracticable, or virtually so” (to borrow the words of Cunningham). Nevertheless, we also urge that apostasy not be used as a pretext for anarchy. Even in an era of irregularity, believers should foster the ordinary institutions of church government, insofar as possible (without compromise to the Gospel or corruption to the worship of God.)

In practical terms, what does this mean? It means that believers who are isolated should look for a congregation that exhibits the marks of a true church. If they don't find one, then they should help to begin a Gospel church in their area.³³

If an isolated group of believers begins a new congregation, they ought to seek the counsel and/or assistance of faithful ministers (and existing faithful congregations) from distant places, when possible. Moreover, the goal should be to establish new congregations on such a basis that they can develop into a settled congregations, with regular church officers and a ministry that reflects the Biblical pattern of polity.

Permit me to use an historical illustration.³⁴ During the reign of Bloody Mary, numerous Englishmen were dispersed throughout Europe, leaving them somewhat scattered and isolated. One company of men, among whom was William Whittingham, organized a congregation in Frankfort. They

33 In times of great apostasy or persecution, some Christians have relocated in order to join themselves to a Gospel church; that might be another option, but it is not a requirement.

34 For details regarding the English exiles covered in the following summary, readers are referred to the anonymous account, published in 1572, *A Brief Discourse of the Troubles Begun at Frankfort in Germany, Anno Domini 1554 About the Book of Common Prayer and Ceremonies, and Continued by the Englishmen There, to the end of Queen Mary's Reign: in Which Discourse the Gentle Reader Shall See the Very Original and Beginning of All the Contention that has been and What was the Cause of the Same* (various editions); Paul Hume Brown, *John Knox: A Biography* (London, 1895), volume .; Lewis Lupton, *A History of the Geneva Bible, Volume One: The Quarrel* (London: Fauconberg Press, 1966); W. Stanford Reid, *Trumpeter of God: A Biography of John Knox* (New York, 1974).

were not paralyzed by the misconception that they could not be a church unless they first had officers. Nor did they wait for some mythical Presbytery to show up and tell them what to do. They saw it as an obligation, as believers, to band together and form a church.

The congregation in Frankfort issued pastoral calls to various men for joint ministry to the congregation; one of those pastors was John Knox. There still was no functional presbytery, so the congregation had to grapple with its isolated status. Some Anglican bishops offered to supervise the work, but this offer was refused.

The unsettled state of the congregation made it somewhat vulnerable to assault, and the initial work was subverted. A new group of exiles joined the congregation, and devised means to impose an Anglican ritual and government upon the fledgling church. These late-comers maligned Knox and accused him of treason before the civil authorities, as a tactic to get rid of the stalwart pastor. (Knox was constrained to leave the city.)

Once Knox was gone and the Anglican party gained the upper hand, it quickly became apparent that the assembly was retreating from the goals of the original congregation. At this point, after failed attempts at reconciliation, Whittingham and other members had a decision to make. Should they stay, and “seek to reform from within”? Was it their duty to submit to the current ruling faction and/or the will of the new majority? This history is quite instructive.

Whittingham and others withdrew and moved to Geneva for a fresh start. Doubtless, these men sought counsel and cooperation from John Calvin and other prominent ministers. But the English-speaking congregation was still a *self-governing body*, which did not have the benefit of a presbytery to direct their efforts.

What did they do? Did they wring their hands, claiming that they could not organize a church without the formal oversight of a presbytery? No. They organized the congregation anew, without the malignant party that had spoiled the endeavor in Frankfort.

Once again, the congregation called pastors to jointly minister to the congregation. They elected office-bearers. They issued a confession of faith, and adopted a book of order to serve as a guide of polity during the period of their exile. This small congregation ultimately produced an English translation of the Bible, now known as the Geneva Bible. They also began work on an English metrical psalter. They accomplished these and many other remarkable achievements while in a state of exile, and without a regular presbytery.

When Queen Elizabeth took the throne in England, most of the Englishmen in Geneva returned to their home country. Similarly, Knox returned to his native land of Scotland. Remarkably, the church order of the English congregation in Geneva provided the basis for the *Book of Common Order* that was adopted early in the Scottish Reformation.

Thus, the polity of the isolated English exiles in Geneva provided a comfortable foundation for the development of a more mature Presbyterian order in Scotland. These different expressions of Reformed polity were not mutually exclusive, but complementary: each one suited to the differing circumstances of its time. The early situation in Geneva is an example of “particular circumstances, when perfect regularity in regard to outward arrangements is impracticable” (again to borrow from William Cunningham). As the Reformation developed, the Scottish Church was able to develop greater

regularity, and the institutions of church government (church officers, sessions, presbyteries) became more mature.

To many Presbyterians, the idea that church members should initiate reform seems positively un-Presbyterian. But it was not always so. The groundwork for solid reform has often been provided by faithful church members who refused to submit to the corrupt overlords who reigned in the professing church of their day. From the early days of the Reformation, to the times of Jenny Geddes and the Covenanters, there have often been faithful members who have jolted the church back to the truth.

What I am suggesting here is that, in the current era of widespread apostasy, serious Christians need to think differently than they presently do about how the professing church is to be reformed and restored to Biblical order. Some of the traditional paradigms, which wait for reform and support to originate from within stagnant denominations, rest upon naïve and unrealistic expectations. Therefore, people with Reformed convictions must be willing to rise above the provincial thinking of our time and culture in order to assess the current ecclesiastical landscape from a more radical, Biblical perspective. In most cases, we must come to grips with the *reality* of just how far most institutional “churches” have degenerated from being true Gospel churches, and how outrageous it is, in such circumstances, for ecclesiastical leaders to demand the blind loyalty and submission of church members.

To alter our thinking in this manner may require a paradigm shift similar to that which occurred during the Protestant Reformation. Imagine the consternation, if you will, of the average person at the time of the Reformation, when he discovered that virtually everything he had been taught about the institutional church was wrong and required immediate amendment. One contemporary historian has rightly spoken of the shock or “alienation” experienced by members of sixteenth-century society, when everything familiar to them instantly became unfamiliar: “suddenly finding the pope to be the devil’s agent and the miracle of the Mass the most evil moment in their earthly experience.”³⁵

My friends, would it shock you to contemplate that our society is in a spiritual condition as destitute as medieval Europe, before the Reformation took root?³⁶ Are you prepared to evaluate whether “Reformed” or “evangelical” churches truly hold to the Scriptural Gospel and Biblical

worship? And if the existing leaders in your church are tolerating corruptions of the Gospel and worship, and are abusing their position as “rulers,” are you willing to oppose them as usurpers, much as our Reformed forefathers resisted the pretentious claims of the papal priesthood?

To those who are elders: I entreat you to consider the true nature of a ministerial calling. If you genuinely desire the *work* of a bishop, then you have noble aspirations (1 Timothy 3:1). I implore you: Give heed to the admonition of the Lord, who charged the Apostle Peter, “Do you love me? ... Feed my sheep” (John 21:15-17). Be not among the shepherds of Israel who “feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks?” (Ezekiel 34:1). Follow the example of the Great Shepherd who, when he saw the multitudes, “was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd” (Matthew 9:36).

Presently, great harm is being done to individual church members (and to the health of the church generally), because of the reckless behavior of Imperious Presbyterians. Consider the plight of the sheep who are being mistreated by those claiming to be leaders of the flock. If you desire to be a faithful church officer, is it not your duty to confront your peers, if they offend in this manner? Remember the example of the Apostle Paul, who withstood Peter “to his face, because he was to be blamed” (Galatians 2:11). Is it too much, then, to expect elders to rein in their erring brethren?

Finally, may we all labor to see the church restored as a harmonious community, where the Gospel, true worship, and charity are preeminent. To that end, we are reminded in the *Larger Catechism* (#191), to pray “that the church [be] furnished with all Gospel-officers and ordinances”; for the Lord himself instructs us: “The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth laborers into his harvest” (Matthew 9:37-38).

35 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Viking, 2004), xix.

36 I know that by merely posing this question, I will be considered very extreme by some hearers. After all, they may think, America is a very religious nation, both in its history and its current proliferation of churches and “ministries.” Nevertheless, I simply underscore the obvious point, that mere religious fervor is not a measure of true Christianity. Medieval European society was very religious; zeal abounded in many quarters, but it was a zeal without knowledge. If people truly consider the message preached by the Reformers – that is, the true Gospel – they will realize how few held to it prior to the Reformation, and, similarly, how few adhere to it today. Indeed, the broader “evangelical” community has largely abandoned the Biblical evangel, choosing instead a message that is “another gospel.” For more details on this subject see what I have written elsewhere in *Making Shipwreck of the Faith: Evangelicals and Roman Catholics Together* (Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, 1995).