

What We Believe: Knowing and Loving our Doctrines  
 Adult Sunday Studies 2023-24  
 20 | Church Gov't

## WHERE REDEMPTION IS APPLIED: CHURCH POWER & GOVERNMENT

**Understanding Church Power** [notes from James Bannerman's *The Church of Christ*]

### 1. What Kind of Power?

1. *Spiritual* - as opposed to physical or outward authority of the state, the Church's authority is strictly spiritual
  1. *Dogmatic - [Word]*, or articles of faith - revealed in the Word, the Church is a "divinely appointed witness for God's truth" to those outside the Church, and a witness and teacher to those within
    1. Anything but a spiritual authority is inconsistent with the goal, which is to bring men to faith and obedience - "a compulsory power can never secure my belief"
  2. *Ordinances and Government [Sacraments]* - administrative and declaratory power, as channels through which the Spirit works
    1. No physical influence, or temporal or coercive power, can be used
  3. *Discipline* - admission to and exclusion from the fellowship of the Church
    1. Confirm in their faith and obedience; or convict of sin and recover them by admonition, warning, censure, rebuke or excommunication

### 2. Where does the Power Come From? - The Source

1. "The Lord Jesus Christ is the only Head of the Church" - *directly from God by "positive" institution*, yet also including voluntary submission of human members. Why?
  1. Christ commands his members to associate corporately
  2. Christ appoints office-bearers after His ascension, and providing for their succession
  3. Christ enacts laws for the conduct of the members and office-bearers
    1. Precepts and promises to officers as rulers, not just teachers
    2. Duties of submissions to the office-bearers by the members

3. Examples of power, “not of advice merely”, such as the “keys of the kingdom of heaven”
4. Christ is *both founder AND administrator*, not just one or the other
5. *Not in the Church itself* - “it is not the Church that governs and dispenses ordinances and spiritual graces in His name, and by reason of His original gift and endowment to her, but Christ who, **personally present**, governs and administers ordinances and blessing through the Church. The Church has no store of life apart from Christ being in it”.

### 3. How Far Should/Can it Go? - “The Extent and Limits of Church Power”

1. **Problems to avoid:** 1. *Overrate* - extending it beyond the bounds of Scripture; 2. *Underrate* - church power becomes merely human appointment and advice, not authority
2. **Extent:** submit to Church power insofar as it is in agreement with the Word of God AND, in a subordinate sense, because it is emitted by the Church, which is itself instituted by God in His Word - lest there be no power that is binding *except for what the members otherwise consent to*.  
**Authority, by definition, cannot be limited by consent.**
  1. Church power is more and better than just a human power that is in agreement with the Word, which is **advice, not authority**.
  2. If the Church is more than just a voluntary, humanly-appointed institution, than it must possess power outside of human consent; otherwise, there would be “laws without authority, ordinances without grace, and discipline without judgment” (239). Compare the judgment of a civil law court, which is pronounced and carried out regardless of the consent of those it applies to.
  3. **If power is only so far as consent goes, then the majority, in effect, becomes the office-bearers**, since the minority must obey the will of the majority.
  4. The “oversees”, “presbyters”, “rulers” and “pastors” are throughout Scripture NOT bound by the consent of the community
    1. “Reprove” and “rebuke” do NOT admit of being limited by the consent of those receiving it, although one would do best to persuade
    2. Obeying your elders, submitting to them, does NOT admit of such limits

3. See Heb. 13.17; Luke 2.51; Rom. 13.1,5; 1Cor. 16.16; 1Cor. 5, 1Peter 5
- 3. Limits:**
1. *Spiritual* - excluding temporal or civil authority, like legal punishments or fines
  2. *By Christ, the Head:*
    1. *Declarative power - The church laws are declaratory*, NOT legislative - meaning they merely explain, apply and declare the laws that Christ has already revealed. The Word of God alone has powers of legislation, enacting laws.
    2. *The powers are ministerial and subordinate* - office-bearers are merely servants with authority *derived* from Christ, carrying out the will of Christ, not their own.[from Ch. 2, pp. 218-221]
  3. *By the Word of God* - forbidding any *addition or subtraction*
  4. **By the rights, privileges, and liberty of the Christian people** - freedom of conscience - see WCF 20

**4. Who and What's it for? - "The End and Design of Church Power"**

1. **To the Church, directly; to the world, indirectly** (Cf. 1Cor. 5.11-13 - where church power is instructed to exclude from its fellowship an unrepentant sinner; but not to impose any restrictions with those in the world outside the church)
2. This does not diminish its mission, but limits its role as an office with power.
3. It has no authority over those outside the Church, in the world, other than to witness for God.
4. For the edification, not the destruction, of the whole body
5. **From our Book of Church Order**
  1. 27-3 - "The exercise of discipline is highly important and necessary. In its **proper usage discipline maintains**: a. the glory of God, b. the purity of His Church, c. the keeping and reclaiming of disobedient sinners. Discipline is for the purpose of godliness (1 Timothy 4:7); therefore, it demands a self-examination under Scripture. Its ends, so far as it involves judicial action, are the rebuke of offenses, the removal of scandal, the vindication of the honor of Christ, the promotion of the purity and general edification of the Church, and the spiritual good of offenders themselves.

2. 27-4. The power which Christ has given the Church is **for building up, and not for destruction**. It is to be exercised as under a dispensation of mercy and not of wrath. As in the preaching of the Word the wicked are doctrinally separated from the good, so by discipline the Church authoritatively separates between the holy and the profane. In this it acts the part of a tender mother, correcting her children for their good, that every one of them may be presented faultless in the day of the Lord Jesus. Discipline is systematic training under the authority of God's Scripture. No communing or non-communing member of the Church should be allowed to stray from the Scripture's discipline. Therefore, teaching elders must: a. instruct the officers in discipline, b. instruct the congregation in discipline, c. jointly practice it in the context of the congregation and church courts.
3. 27-5 - Scriptural law is the basis of all discipline because it is the revelation of God's Holy will. **Proper disciplinary principles** are set forth in the Scriptures and must be followed. They are: a. Instruction in the Word; b. Individual's responsibility to admonish one another (Matthew 18:15, Galatians 6:1); c. If the admonition is rejected, then the calling of one or more witnesses (Matthew 18:16); d. If rejection persists, then the Church must act through her court unto admonition, suspension, excommunication and deposition.

### Church Government

#### 1. Biblical Examples

##### 1. 1 Peter 5:1-5

1. Notice the "not's" and the corresponding exhortations to those who are "elders."
2. Notice also the exhortation to those who are the recipients of church government

##### 2. Hebrews 13:7-17

1. Notice how v. 7 and v. 17 are both directed to the recipients of church government
2. So what is the point of v. 8-16 in relation to 7 and 17 do you think?
3. What are the dangers to the gospel that are in view here and that require church government?

3. *It's good news that God has instituted "undershepherds" to hold us to the truth and grace of the gospel. We need help to be set free from our sins and to guard the grace of God in our lives!*

## 2. Christ's Mediated Authority - "On earth as it is in Heaven"

1. **WCF 30.1-2:** "I. The Lord Jesus, as king and head of His Church, has therein appointed a government, in the hand of Church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate. II. To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed; by virtue whereof, they have power, respectively, to retain, and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word, and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the Gospel; and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require."
2. **Preface of the PCA Book of Church Order:** "Jesus Christ, upon whose shoulders the government rests (Isaiah 9:6) . . . having all power given unto Him in heaven and in earth by the Father (Matt.28:18) . . . (as) Head over all things to the Church, which is His body; the fullness of Him that filleth all in all (Eph. 1:20-23); He being ascended up far above all heavens, that He might fill all things, received gifts for His Church, and gave all offices necessary for the edification of His Church and the perfecting of His saints.(Eph.4:10-12). It belongs to His Majesty from His throne of glory to rule and teach the Church through His Word and Spirit by the ministry of men; thus mediately exercising His own authority and enforcing His own laws, unto the edification and establishment of His Kingdom."

### 1. Read Matt. 16.18-19 and 18.17ff.:

1. "The concept of "keys," is derived from the Old Testament (1 Chron. 9:17-27, Nehemiah 7:1ff) and related to the Temple "gatekeepers" as having the duty of employing keys to open it every morning. The gatekeepers were literally to "guard" (Neh. 7:3ff) the entrance into the Temple. The important thing here is that this image of "keys" is expanded in Isaiah 22:20-22 to foreshadow the ministry of the Messiah." - Preston Graham
2. Calvin - "But the church binds him whom it excommunicates—not that it casts him into everlasting ruin and despair, but because it condemns his life and morals and already warns him of his condemnation unless he should repent. It looses him whom it

receives into communion for it makes him a sharer of the unity which it has in Christ Jesus.”

2. *Apostolic practice as foundation*: Eph.2:20; 1 Cor. 4:18-21; 5:1-13; 2 Cor. 2:1-10; 7:8-12; 10:2-8; 13:2-10; 1 Tim.1:19-20
3. *Directions given in Scripture for the manner of its exercise*: 1 Tim. 5:20; 2 Tim.2:24-26; Jude 23; Tit. 3:10; 2 Thess.6-14ff
4. *Directions given in Scripture for the manner of its reception*: Hebrews 13:17ff; Romans 13:1-4; 1 Peter 5:5

### 3. What's so Unique about Presbyterianism?

1. The word “presbyterian” simply comes from the Greek, *presbyter*, which means elder or bishop. Presbyterian thus denotes the form of church government where elders form the seat of authority.
2. *Two Offices* - Church government has always been present, albeit in different administrations throughout redemptive history. The office of “teaching/priestly elder” and “ruling elder,” the latter as chosen from “among the people.” Exodus 18:13ff, (cf. 2 Chron.19:8-9).
  1. **Lay-elders** focused upon the governing aspects and grew naturally out of the patriarchic family system and continued through the Mosaic period even into the exile. This office was set apart in its “uniquely representative” nature as a lay-office and was therefore “selected by the people and speaking and acting on their behalf.” (Ex. 17:5-6, 19:7, 24:1-11, Lev. 4:13-15, Dt.21:1-9, 1Sam.8:43, 2Sam5:3, 1Kgs 20:7-8.) The lay-elder office was “regarded by the principle of representation of the whole congregation of Israel.” (Ex.12:3, 6, 21, 1Kgs 8:1, 2, 3, 5, 14, 22, 55, 62, 65. For instance, these lay-elders were seen requesting a king on behalf of the people in 1Sam.8:4, and acting on behalf of Israel in covenant making in 2 Sam.5:3, Ex.24:1ff.). There was “no evidence that the ministry of Word or the teaching of the law was ever assigned to this office or that the ability to teach had any bearing on qualifications for it” (Ezek. 7:26, Jer. 18:18.).
  2. **Pastor-priest** - See Dt. 33:9-10. The pastor-priests (out of the tribe of Levi) shared with the elders the responsibilities of judgment and rule with special responsibilities for difficult cases which required their expertise in the Scriptures (cf. Dt.17:8-13, 21:5, 1Chron.23:4). And yet, these responsibilities were adjunct to their primary calling as ministers

of the word and sacrament and as the superintendents of Israel's worship (Rayburn, p. 225-226. cf. Lev. 1:5ff, Ezek. 7:26, Ezra 7:10-11, Neh.8:7-9, 15:11ff, 1Chron 15:11ff, 16:4ff.). As per the unique role of mediating between God and humanity, the priests were *not* chosen from among the family system, but were set apart by God from the tribe of Levi. They were of a "separate and distinct membership" and therefore "did not share the characteristically representative character of the eldership . . . the priesthood was organized according to a set of regulations which pertained to itself alone." They were, in short, claimed by God as his own ministers in Israel and were granted a direct ministerial authority not assigned to elders ( cf. Num.3:5-13, Num.6:22-27, Dt. 18:2, 5.)

### 3. **Two Offices in the NT** - 1 Tim 3 in relation to 1 Tim 5:17

1. There is some difference of opinion within the reformed tradition about whether the "deacon" in 1Tim. 3:11 is a "servant elder", contrasted with the "bishop elder" as then to correspond to the two types of elders in 1 Tim. 5:17; or, if 1 Tim. 5:17 is describing two types of "elders" as related to the office described in 1 Tim. 3:1-10, as distinguished from a third office of "deacon" in 1Tim.3:11. (Note as well, this would affect what you see happening in Acts 6—the appointment of "elder deacons" or "deacons as distinguished from elders". This is the back story as to why CPC has a "**Servant Leader Board**", rather than a Board of Deacons. We believe in the first option. The important thing is to see the distinction that was also in the NT context between pastor-elders and ruling elders as corresponding to the office of "Priest/Elder" and "Governing Elders" in the OT.
2. See Phil. 1.2 and other addresses, where Paul only ever addresses **two sets of officers**, never three.

### 4. **Several vs. Joint actions**

1. **Several** - officers acting individually as commissioned by the church to preach, administer sacraments, teach, shepherd, etc.
2. **Joint** - jurisdictional rule and order exercised by officers gathered together jointly. No individual elder can declare judgment upon someone.

### 5. **Church Courts** - "the parts are in the whole and the whole is in the parts. . . all of the courts of the church are essentially equal in power."

1. Local - "Session" - see 1Cor. 5
  2. Regional - "Presbytery" - see Acts 15
  3. National - "General Assembly" - see Acts 15
6. **Three common forms of government:**
1. **Prelacy (hierarchical):** administered by archbishops, bishops, deans, archdeacons and other ecclesiastical offices on a hierarchical system. All things are general. (Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Eastern Orthodox, Methodist, Lutheran).
  2. **Independent (democratic):** Each separate congregation is under Christ subject to no external jurisdiction. All things are local.
    1. Congregational Independency (Baptist, Congregationalism, most "non-denominational")
    2. Representative Independency (Reformed Baptist)
  3. **Presbyterianism (representative democracy, with higher review and control):** Representative government that enjoy jurisdictional/ ecclesiastical connection to other churches within same denomination. Some things are originally local; some are general. Even originally local matters may become general, through review, complaint, or appeal.