

AN EXPLANATION AND DEFENCE
OF THE TERMS OF COMMUNION,
ADOPTED BY THE
COMMUNITY OF DISSENTERS.

By the Reformed Presbytery of Scotland, 1801.
Sabbath Afternoon Studies: Part 10.

ON ARTICLE III: PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH-GOVERNMENT.

THIS article requires our assent to the divine right and original of Presbyterian church government. As the great body of the inhabitants of Scotland profess themselves Presbyterians; the propriety of this article, it is hoped, will not be much disputed: but though it should, it doth not comport with our present design to enlarge on the subject.

That the power of church discipline and government is not lodged in the community of the faithful at large, but is entrusted to the office-bearers, or public and regularly installed ministry of the church, appears perfectly obvious from the plain distinction which is constantly made, through the whole of the New Testament, between the spiritual rulers, called to labour in Word and doctrine, or to rule with diligence; and those who are to be subject to them in the Lord, obeying them, and esteeming them highly in love, for their works' sake. ► It is no less evident from our Lord's words, addressed to the apostle Peter, and his fellow-disciples, now solemnly called, and set apart, to the work of the ministry, by himself as King upon the holy hill of Zion. "Upon this rock," says he, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." [Matt. 16.18,19.] ► The same thing is also manifest from those inspired epistles, addressed to the angels, or ministry, of the churches in Asia. The ministry in one of these churches is sharply reprov'd for retaining in communion persons who were erroneous and openly scandalous; while the ministry of another is much commended for casting them out:—Plainly importing, that the power of ministerially binding and loosing, in the name, and according to the laws of Christ, was lodged with them. [Rev. 2.]

That lesser ecclesiastical courts, of more limited inspection and jurisdiction, should consider themselves as subordinated unto greater courts, where there are more counsellors, and, consequently, the higher probability of safety, in passing such decisions as are of general concern, is sufficiently obvious from the sacred description of that venerable synod which met at Jerusalem in the days of the Apostles. [Acts 15.] While it perfectly harmonizes with the nature, and comely order of all society in general. And,

That the church's adored Head allows no superiority to any one individual minister of the Gospel above another, but considers them all as brethren of equal authority, is clear as noon-day, from his own express and very pointed language. "Ye know," says he, "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. One is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock."¹ The indiscriminate use of the words BISHOP and PRESBYTER, in the New Testament, to signify one and the same official character, and the granting to a judicial meeting of presbyters the power of ordination, which is the highest power claimed in the church, also proclaim the equality of Gospel ministers.

The Presbyterian form of church-government, therefore, agreeably to our subordinate standards, seems to be the only form which can properly claim a divine original. It makes a distinguished part of the faith once delivered to the saints in these covenanted isles of the sea. In the support and defence of it, our pious and venerable ancestors made a noble stand, many of them resisting unto blood, striving against sin, and not reckoning their lives dear unto themselves; if so be they might transmit it, in its original simplicity and purity, to the rising race, as the divinely appointed and comely order of Christ's house. We, accordingly, consider it as still deserving a place in our terms of admission to the privileges of the church. Those who wish to see its claim to a divine original fully demonstrated, by strong and conclusive arguments, may consult, among others, the publications mentioned at the foot of the page.²

===== SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL =====

Contrary Error 1: Congregationalism and Independency

A Testimony Against the Degenerate Congregationalism Common in Ireland, 1875.

By the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland.

The system of Congregationalism, or Independency, assumes that each separate assembly of Christians meeting in one place for worship, is a church, separate from and independent of all others—that the whole power of government and discipline is lodged in the hands of church members—that ministers and elders have no spiritual authority—and that there is no warrant for Presbyterian assemblies and courts of appeal. In all these respects it is opposed to the order instituted by Christ and established by His apostles, in the primitive Christian Church. Inconsistent with the unity of the church as one body, it divests ecclesiastical officers of the power which Christ has given them for rule as well as for edification, and deprives the members of the church of the right of appeal to higher courts. ► Congregationalists moreover, reject and denounce creeds and confessions, meaning such creeds and confessions as have been carefully prepared and adopted by the church as subordinate standards and tests of orthodoxy

1 Matt. 20.25,26, and 23.8; 1 Pet. 5.3.

2 The Grand Debate. [1652.] The Divine Right of Church Government; by the London Ministers. [1646.] The Due Right of Presbyteries; by Mr. Rutherford. [1644.] Letters on the Constitution, Government, and Discipline of the Christian Church; by Mr. Brown. [1767.] A Short Vindication of Presbyterian Church-Government; by Mr. Whytock. [1799.]

for the whole body—groundlessly asserting that these are thrust into the place of God’s Word, and tyrannically enforced on the consciences of men.[1] At the same time, they themselves exact from ministers at ordination, and from others, on admission to membership, a public creed or confession of faith, of the orthodoxy of which the church is supposed to judge at the time without any fixed standard, and thereupon to grant or refuse admission. ► These extemporized creeds, which are as numerous as the members of their church, must, in general, be very crude, incomplete, and unsatisfactory productions—being liable to most of all the abuses, without the undeniable advantages of a common and accepted confession of the united faith of the church, based upon and subordinate to the Word of God, which alone is the infallible rule of faith and practice. This system cannot maintain doctrinal purity in the Church, or restore it when corrupted; and it precludes combined ecclesiastical action for extending the kingdom of Christ. We gladly admit that the doctrines of evangelical religion are in general held by Congregationalists, and there is considerable regard shown to spirituality of communion; yet it is notorious that loose sentiments and even fundamental errors respecting the Inspiration of the Scriptures, the nature and extent of the Atonement, and other doctrines, are taught in Independent churches. [1 This error is not universal among them. ex Bellamy’s Letter to Scripturista]

Contrary Error 2: Diocesan Episcopacy

Excerpted from The Second Book of Discipline, Ch. 11: Reformation Desired.

As to Bishops, if the name *ἐπισκοπος* be properly taken, they are all one with the ministers, as before was declared. For it is not a name of superiority, and Lordship, but of office and watching.

Yet because in the corruption of the Church, this name (as others) have been abused, and yet is likely to be, we cannot allow the fashion of these new chosen Bishops, neither of the Chapters that are Electors of them to such offices, as they are chosen unto. True Bishops should addict themselves to a particular flock, which sundry of them refuse, neither should they usurp Lordship over their brethren, and over the inheritance of Christ, as these men do.

Pastors, insofar as they are pastors, have not the office of visitation of more churches joined to the pastorship, without it be given to them. It is a corruption, that Bishops should have further bounds to visit, than they may lawfully. No man ought to have the office of visitation, but he that is lawfully chosen thereunto.

It agreeth not with the word of God, that Bishops should be Pastors of Pastors, Pastors of many flocks, and yet without a certain flock, and without ordinary teaching.

It agreeth not with the Scriptures, that they should be exempted from the correction of their brethren, and discipline of the particular Eldership of the Church, where they shall serve, neither that they usurp the Office of visitation of other churches, nor any other Function beside other Ministers, but so far as shall be committed to them by the Church.

Wherefore, we desire the Bishops that now are, either to agree to that order that God’s word requires in them, as the general Church will prescribe unto them, not passing their bounds, either in Ecclesiastical or Civil affairs, or else to be deposed from all function in the Church.

We deny not in the meantime, but Ministers may and should assist their Princes when they are required, in all things agreeable to the Word, whether it be in Council or Parliament, or otherwise, providing always they neither neglect their own charges, nor through flattery of Princes, hurt the publick estate of the Church.

Contrary Error 3: Tyranny in Unlawful Determinations

Excerpted from Protesters no Subverters, and Presbytery no Papacy, 1658.

(This matter will apply to every type of Church Government.)

We shall now only speak of that one [matter] in which these Brethren assert the essence and being of Presbyterian Government to consist; and for denying of which, they hold forth the Protesting Brethren, as men that have receded from their former principles, and have in their judgments and practices turned adversaries to the very being of Government, to wit, That arbitrary and unlimited submission to the Sentences of the Church-judicatories, in matters of Discipline and Government. [Against this] we offer these Reasons:

1. Subjection to such Decrees and Sentences [which are] unjust and repugnant to the Word of God hath neither precept nor precedent for it in the Book of God.
2. It is contrary to clear Scripture precepts and Scripture precedents: *Be not servants of men*, 1 Cor. 7.23. *Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage*, Gal. 5.1. *It is better to obey God than men*, Acts 5.29. *Preach the Word, be instant in season and out of season*, 2 Tim. 4.2.
3. This submission dethroneth Jesus Christ, who only hath power over the consciences of men.
4. This submission concludeth a man under a necessity of sinning against God, by omitting those necessary duties that are commanded him of God, upon a non-relevant reason.
5. If such a submission be due to the Judicatories of the Kirk in matters of Discipline and Government, We do not see how it is not also due unto them in matters of Doctrine and Worship.

Discussion Questions

1. What kind of church government was is most familiar to the inhabitants of Scotland?
A. Presbyterian Church Government, so that it does not need as much said in its defence.
2. Is the power of church government and discipline lodged in the community of the faithful at large?
A. No. This is congregationalism, the theory of the Independents.
3. How can it be shown from the book of Revelation that discipline is the power of ministers?
A. In the Epistles to the ministry of the churches, they are held accountable for neglecting discipline.
4. The example of what Synod may be regarded as sufficient precedent for the subordination of lesser church courts to greater church courts?
A. The Synod which met in Jerusalem in Acts 15, and heard complaints of matters in Antioch, etc.
5. How may we conclude that Jesus looks upon all the ministers of his Church as holding an equal authority?

- A. The Lord Jesus describes the contrast he expects to find between the government of his Church and the governing practices of both the Gentiles and the corrupt Jews. Matt. 20.25,26, and 23.8.
6. What words in the New Testament seem to be used indiscriminately, as if they both referred to the same office, though the literal meaning differs?
- A. Bishop: ἐπίσκοπος, and Presbytery: πρεσβύτερος. Titus 1.5,7; Acts 20.17,28.
7. In the British Isles, and especially Scotland, to what extent did many Protestants take a stand for Presbyterian church government in opposition to other systems of government?
- A. They endured great conflicts while being oppressed by the Episcopalians, and some resisted even unto blood in refusing that Charles II's bishops should dominate over the Church of Scotland.
8. What are some of the errors in conflict with a Biblical divine-right Presbyterian church government?
- A. Congregationalism and Independency, Prelacy, Papacy, Erastianism of various sorts, Arbitrary tyranny of church authority over men's consciences exercised in any form.