

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Rev. Walter Harinck

STUDY GUIDE

Module 6:
**ECCLESIOLOGY—
THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH**

Lecture 5:
**THE GOVERNMENT
OF THE CHURCH**



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Rev. Walter Harinck is minister of the gospel in the Gereformeerde Gemeente (Netherlands Reformed Church) in Utrecht, the Netherlands. He served as board member of the denominational foreign mission committee for over 30 years. throughout these years he travelled to many continents, advising missionaries and overseeing their labors in their remote stations and supporting young churches in their ministry.

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STUDY GUIDE

Module 6

Ecclesiology—the Doctrine of the Church

1. Introduction to Ecclesiology
2. What Does the Bible Say About the Church?
3. The Nature of the Church
4. The Authority of the Church
- 5. The Government of the Church**
6. Church Offices
7. Church Discipline
8. The Worship of the Church and the Means of Grace
9. The Sacrament of Christian Baptism
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Ecclesiology—The Doctrine of the Church

Lecture 5:

The Government of the Church

Introduction

Throughout his entire ministry, the Apostle Paul was careful to institute proper organization in the churches he established. He saw the need for gospel order. This included the appointment of elders and deacons, which was an important factor in the spiritual growth of the new converts. It was also a safeguard against error and fanaticism, and promoted unity among the believers. In place after place, Paul diligently instructed and aided the churches in the establishment of proper order. He wrote to the Christians in Corinth, “Let all things be done decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14, verse 40). Regarding the work in Crete, Paul instructed Titus to “set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee” (Titus 1, verse 5). Inspiration shows that the appointment of elders and deacons was a fundamental element of the gospel order that Paul established in the churches.

Theme: *The Government of the Church.*

I. Different Forms of Church Government

1. Apostle Paul instituted proper organization in the early churches.
 - a. The appointment of elders and deacons.
 - b. Let all things be done decently and in order—1 Corinthians 14:40.
2. The Roman Catholic Church.
 - a. The Pope has worldwide authority.
3. Episcopalian and Methodist churches.
 - a. Bishops have regional authority; Archbishops have national authority.
4. Presbyterian churches.
 - a. Presbyteries and consistories have regional authority.
 - b. General Assemblies and Synods have national authority.

5. Baptist churches and independent churches.
 - a. Each congregation governs itself.
6. Three basic forms of church government:
 - a. Episcopalian
 - b. Presbyterian
 - c. Congregational

Questions:

1. Why was Paul so careful to institute proper organization for the early churches? Why was it important for the churches to appoint elders and deacons?

2. How is the government of the Roman Catholic Church different from all the rest of these denominations?

3. What are the three main categories of church government?

II. Episcopalian Form

1. The priesthood—archbishop, bishops, diocese, rector and vicar.
2. Final authority for decision making is outside the local church.
 - a. An independent order of bishops, as successors of the apostles.
 - b. The community of believers does not share in church government.
3. Top-down authority, ordained according to the Episcopalian priesthood.
 - a. Archbishop has regional authority over many bishops.
 - b. Bishops have authority over a “diocese” of congregations.
 - c. Rector has authority over a local congregation.

4. Church government over the present Roman Catholic Church is closely related to the Episcopalian form.
 - a. But the Pope is believed to be the infallible head and authority of the church.
5. Episcopalian church government is not found in the New Testament, but is a natural outgrowth of the early church.
 - a. Greek word *episkopos* means “overseer” or “bishop” or “elder.”
6. Conclusion: Episcopalian church government is a deviation from New Testament.

Questions

1. Please describe the organizational structure of the Episcopalian form of church government.

2. How is the form of government in the Roman Catholic Church similar to the Episcopalian form?

3. What are some of the supportive arguments of the Episcopalian system? What conclusions can we draw from this form of church government?

4. How do we see the wisdom of Christ in safeguarding his church against the abuse of power?

III. Presbyterian Form

1. Based on the biblical principle of eldership in authority over the church.

- a. Name derived from “presbyter,” meaning “elder.”
 - b. Presbytery means “assembly of elders.”
2. Elders must be called by Christ.
- a. Internal call—Christ gives him a desire, makes him willing.
 - b. External call—he called and ordained by the church.
3. A plurality of elders should govern each congregation.
4. Fundamental principles of the Presbyterian or Reformed form.
- a. Christ is the Head of the church and the source of all her authority.
 - b. Christ exercises his authority by means of the Spirit, and by the Word of God.
 - c. Christ, as King, endowed his church with power.
 - 1) Officers of the church are servants of Christ first.
 - 2) Officers’ authority is from Christ, not from the members of the church.
 - d. Ruling power resides primarily in the local church.
 - e. Broader power can function in presbyteries, assemblies, classis, and synods.
5. Three arguments for federative unity through affiliation of local churches, in a regional and national denomination, organized in classis and synods.
- a. Christological—the church is one in Christ and should maintain unity.
 - b. Pneumatological—the Holy Spirit gives gifts to each member to be used for the good of others.
 - c. Federal—a federative bond is rooted in the covenant of grace, so churches should seek to support and serve one another.
6. Conclusion: The Presbyterian and Reformed system seeks to govern according to Scripture.

Questions:

1. In the Presbyterian form of church government, what are the main qualifications of an elder? Where do we see these qualifications in the Scripture?

2. Explain the benefits of Christ's ruling his church through a plurality of elders? How should the members of the church respond to these ruling elders, according to Hebrews 13:17?

3. In what twofold sense is Christ the Head of the church and the source of all her authority?

4. What are the five fundamental principles of the Reformed and Presbyterian form of church government?

5. In what ways did Christ, as King, endow his church with power?

6. What is the correct understanding of governing authority in the Presbyterian form?

7. Where in Scripture do we see the delegates of local congregations gathering together? How should we view the governing authority of broader assemblies in the Reformed and Presbyterian churches?

8. What are the three strong arguments for the Presbyterian form of church government?

9. Please summarize the main benefits of Reformed and Presbyterian church government.

IV. Congregational Form

1. Independency.
 - a. The governing power rests exclusively with the members of the congregation.
 - b. Each local congregation is a complete church, independent of any other.
2. Some variations in Independent church government:
 - a. A single elder or single pastor has all authority.
 - b. A plurality of elders govern the congregation.
 - c. A corporate board governs the church.
 - d. No church government, but all members of the congregation govern by the leading of the Holy Spirit, with general consensus.
3. Conclusions:
 - a. The form of government adopted by a church is not a major point of doctrine.
 - b. A church can be more pure or less pure on this point.
 - b. Presbyterian or Reformed form of church government is the closest to Scripture.
4. Reformed confessions stress that church government must be based on Scripture.
As stated in *The Belgic Confession of Faith*, articles 30 and 32:
“We believe that this true church ought to be governed according to the spiritual order that our Lord has taught us in his Word.”
“We also believe that although it is useful and good for those who govern the churches to establish and set up a certain order among themselves for maintaining the body of the church, they ought always to guard against deviating from what Christ, our only Master, has ordained for us.”

Questions:

1. What are the main characteristics of the Congregational form of church government?

2. What are some of the various types of church government in Independent congregations?

3. How should we view congregations that say they are opposed to any type of church government, but rely solely on the leadings of the Holy Spirit to govern themselves?

4. What are some final conclusions we can make about forms of church government?

V. Self-Reflection

Did you grasp the clear command and wisdom of Christ in the New Testament about how he would govern his church? What kind of church government have you seen in the church where you might attend? If you are an office-bearer, what is the right way to think about your position? What are your responsibilities? Please pray and ask the Lord's help in fulfilling your calling. If you are not an office-bearer, what can you do in support of those who govern in your church? What can you do for the wellbeing of your congregation?
