

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Rev. Walter Harinck

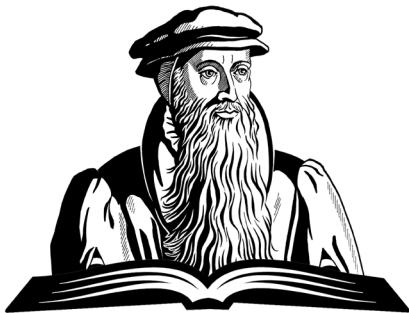
Module 6:

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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Module 6 ~ The Doctrine of the Church

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Module 6 ~ Lecture 5

The Government of the Church

Dear students, in this module, we want to study Church Government. 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. In fact, Paul thought organization was so important, that a short time after he had been stoned in Lystra, he returned to organize the churches. He saw that gospel order, which included the appointment of elders and deacons, 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 churches in the establishment of proper order. 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. A group of believers that simply gathers together for meetings with no officers selected as elders and deacons, is not a properly organized church.

In this lecture, we will study the manner in which a church needs to be properly organized. What are the offices in the church? Which model of church organization is most Biblical? How does the authority of Christ relate to the authority of office-bearers in the church? Important questions like these require our attention.

There are different types of church government. Let us first look at different types of church government. Today we have many different forms of church government. The Roman Catholic Church has a worldwide government under the authority of the Pope. Episcopalian churches, like the Church of England, and Methodist churches have bishops with regional authority, and archbishops with national authority. Presbyterian churches grant regional authority to presbyteries or consistories, and national authority to general assemblies or synods. On the other hand, Baptist churches and many other independent churches have no final governing authority beyond the local congregation, and affiliation with other churches is on a voluntary basis. Looking at local churches, you also see many differences. Baptists often have a single pastor with a board of deacons, but some have a board of elders as well. Presbyterians have a board of elders, and Episcopalians have a vestry.

Let us list the different systems in a systematic way. Forms of church government can be

broken down into three large categories, which are termed Episcopalian, Presbyterian and Congregational. Let's mention the main features of these different forms.

The Episcopalian forms have a government by church officers, known as, the priesthood. The final authority for decision making is outside the local church. The Presbyterian forms have a government by elders, who have authority over their local churches. Some may also have authority through the presbytery, as delegates of the general assembly over churches in a region, and the denomination as a whole. The Congregational forms of church government have final governing authority resting with the members of the local congregation, although various degrees of self-rule are given to pastors, elders, preachers, boards and types of denominational affiliation.

Let's examine each of these forms of church government. In the first place, Episcopalian. Episcopalians hold that the authority in the church has been entrusted by Christ to an independent order of bishops, as the successors of the apostles. The community of believers has no share in the government of the church. Organizationally, you can say that the authority is top-down. The archbishop has authority over many bishops. They in turn have authority over a "diocese"—this is a church under the authority of a bishop. The officer in charge of a local church is a "rector", or a "vicar", who is the assistant of the rector. Archbishops, bishops and rectors are all priests. They have been ordained in this office according to rules of the episcopalian priesthood.

The present Roman Catholic system is closely related to the Episcopalian form. It recognizes not only successors of the apostles in the bishops, but also a successor of Peter, who has the primacy among the apostles. The Pope is honored as the infallible head of the church. As the representative of Christ, he has the right to determine and regulate the doctrine, the worship, and the government of the church.

The argument for the system of the Episcopalians is not found in the New Testament, but that it is a natural outgrowth of the development of the church which began in the New Testament. Another argument is that this system is not forbidden by the New Testament. So they see episcopacy spring from the church itself in a natural way. The present priesthood stands in line of succession. The apostles are the first link of the chain. And from generation to generation of priests, the authority is passed on. Often they refer to the New Testament passages in which the term "episkopos" is used. This Greek word can be translated as "overseer" or "bishop". But this argument is weak, because the word "episkopos" means quite clearly to be another term for elders in New Testament uses. When Paul has called to him the elders of the church at Ephesus, he says to them, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers (episkopos), to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood"—Acts 20, verse 28. So Paul quite readily refers to these elders as overseers or bishops. It is recognized by theologians of all shades of opinion, that in the language of the New Testament, the same officer in the church is called indifferently "bishop" (episkopos) and "elder" (presbyteros). We should also remember the argument that Jesus did not leave one of his disciples with superior authority over the others. Although some of them, like James and Peter and later Paul, had prominence among the group, but they did not have greater authority than others. Peter was even rebuked by Paul in Antioch—Galatians 2, verse 11.

We see the wisdom of Christ in guarding his church against the abuse of power. Just as Jesus appointed a plurality of apostles to have ultimate authority in the early church, so the apostles always appointed a plurality of elders in every church, never leaving only one with governing authority. We also find no reference in the New Testament for a physical continuity of ordination to establish a chain of successors of the apostles. For example, in Acts 13, verse 3, it was not the

Jerusalem apostles who ordained Paul and Barnabas, but people in the church at Antioch who laid hands on them and sent them out. And Timothy was ordained by a council of elders—1 Timothy 4, verse 14.

In conclusion, we must say that the Episcopalian government of the church is a deviation from New Testament standards, and a result of human argumentation, because the apostles established a system of elected local elders from the beginning of the New Testament.

Let's look at the Presbyterian system. The Presbyterian system is based on the Biblical principle of eldership. The name of the system is derived from the presbyter (elder) or presbytery (assembly of elders). In the Reformed system of church government, the body of elders plays an important role. The general principles are found in Scripture, while many of the details are determined by human wisdom and experience.

The elders must be called by Christ internally, like we read in 1 Timothy 3, verse 1: "This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work." And 1 Peter 5, verse 2 says, "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind." When the Lord calls one to serve the church as an elder, he will give you a desire, and he will make you willing! Besides the internal call, there is the need for the external call through God's church: "For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee"—Titus 1, verse 5. Rather than a single office-bearer (minister or elder), a plurality of elders should govern the church. The apostles ordained elders in each local church—Acts 14:23. From Miletus, Paul "sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church"—Acts 20:17.

So the authority to govern in the Presbyterian system, is not vested on any one person, but is committed by the Lord, through the church, to the elders jointly. Christ's desire to rule through a plurality of elders is an expression of his wisdom and goodness. The correlate is that members are to submit to the yoke of Christ, and to the lawful government of the church: "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you"—Hebrews 13, verse 17.

Let's focus on some principles, and focus more on the fundamental principles of the Reformed or Presbyterian system of church government. In the first place, Christ is the Head of the church and the source of all its authority. Christ is the Head of the church in a twofold sense. He is the Head of the church in an organic sense. The church is the body to which he stands in vital and organic relationship. Head and body are closely related. Our body cannot function without the head, and the head cannot function without the body. This close relationship resembles the precious truth of Christ, as the Head of his church. Without him, we can do nothing. Christ fills the body of his church with life and controls by his Spirit.

Many texts speak of this close relationship. Ephesians 1, verse 10 and 22, "That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him;" and, "And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church." Also, Colossians 1, verse 18: "And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence."

He is also the head of the church in the sense that he is its King, who has authority and rule over it—1 Corinthians 12, verse 5: "And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord." Ephesians 4, verses 4 and 5, and 11 and 12: "There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are

called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism...and he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.”

In this capacity Christ established the church, made provision for its ordinances, instituted its offices, and clothed its officers with authority, and is ever present in the church, speaking and acting through its officers. It may be stated that the headship of Christ is the heart of the Reformed or Presbyterian system. This is also related to the three offices in the church, the pastors or ministers of the Word, the elders, and the deacons. We will study that in the next session.

In the second place, Christ exercises his authority by means of the Word. Christ rules his church by the Spirit, and by the Word of God. God gave us his precious Word as the standard for authority in the church. Not the word of a human being, but the Word of the living God is the law of rule for the church. All believers are unconditionally bound to obey the Word of God. It is the Word of the King of the church, the Lord Jesus Christ, that must be obeyed by all. Therefore all those who rule in the church must submit to the control of his Word.

In the third place, Christ, as King, endowed his church with power. Christ gives the power to rule the church. From him is the strength that is necessary for carrying on the work which he entrusted to do. All believers have their gracious share of the power of Christ through the saving work of the Holy Spirit, but Christ bestows a special measure of it upon the officers of his church. They are not servants of the people in the first place, but servants of Christ! Their authority is not delegated to them by the members of the church, but is from Christ, the Head of the church.

In the fourth place, the ruling power resides primarily in the local church. Local consistories are in charge of the congregation. From local consistories, authority can be passed on to classes and synods. Every local church has a certain measure of autonomy or independence, but this is naturally restricted in various ways, as soon as it is affiliated with other local churches. The interest of local churches should always come first. In the second place, there is the interest of the church in general as a denomination.

Fifthly, the broader power of the church. The Presbyterian system makes it possible for the primary authority to stay with the local church, and that assemblies, classis, and synods, can function as broader power of the church. Delegates of local congregations gathering together makes the bond between the congregations visible and enables them to function. A Scriptural precedent for such gatherings is in Acts chapter 15, which has been called the most important meeting ever held in the history of Christianity. In this system, all agree that the authority of the broader assembly does not rob the local congregation of its authority. Classical and synodical gatherings may only function regarding ecclesiastical matters which cannot be resolved on the local level, in an ecclesiastical manner, according to an agreed order.

There are two basic views about the authority of assemblies in Reformed church governance. Some say they have inherent authority, as an ecclesiastical gathering of office-bearers. Others say they have authority, by virtue of their delegation from the churches. The decisions of a synodical body are binding, inasmuch as they are made in accordance with the covenanted order, called Church Order, by which the member churches have bound themselves, and are to be submitted to, as long as they are not demonstrated to be—not merely felt to be—contrary to the precepts, principles, or precedents of Scripture by the due process of appeal.

In the sixth place, theological bases for federative unity. The Presbyterian system has an eye for the unity of the church, through an affiliation of local churches, in a regional and national denomination, organized in classis and synods. Three strong arguments can be seen from Scripture

to organize the church in this manner:

1. Christological—The church is one in Christ, and therefore should show its oneness by bonding together. The unity of John chapter 17 is a spiritual unity that should show itself visibly so that the world may see it. This oneness of the church does not fit with independency.

2. Pneumatological—The Holy Spirit gives gifts to each member of the church—Romans 12:4–5; 1 Corinthians 12:4–7, 12, 14–26, to be used for the good of others—1 Corinthians 14:19. The Spirit’s gifts are not to promote self-sufficiency, but mutual dependency, not only within the local congregation, but also among congregations. These gifts include the governance and ministry in the church. This mutual dependence should then function in every aspect of church life, including church government.

3. Federal—A federative bond is more than simply formal and administrative. It is rooted in the one covenant of grace. Because of God’s covenant, churches are to seek each other out to support and serve each other, as a way of expressing oneness of faith that rises above local situations.

In conclusion, we can express that the Reformed system seeks to discern and apply the principles of church government in Scripture. In doing so, they maintain both the sole headship of Christ in the church, the office of all believers, and the institution of ecclesiastical offices through which Christ works in the church. They avoid the tyranny of the whims of the members, and the tyranny of the individual leader. They recognize both the autonomy of the local congregation, and the importance of having a federative bond with other congregations. This method of church government facilitates the edification of the church, and safeguards against many ills.

The third system, Congregational—the last, and the third type of organizing the authority in the church is called the Congregational type. This is also called the system of Independency. In this system, each local church or congregation is regarded as a complete church, independent of every other. The governing power rests exclusively with the members of the church. Officers have to function according to the authority of the general church meeting. The power they have is not other than that which is delegated to them by the members of the church.

There are some variations on this type of Independent church government. Let’s just mention the different varieties, such as, a single elder or single pastor has the authority, or plural elders govern the local church, or a corporate board rules the church, etc. Some churches, particularly very new churches with a charismatic background, or extreme pietistic tendencies, function as a church with no government but the Holy Spirit. In this case, the church would deny that any form of government is needed, it would depend on all the members of the congregation being sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit in their own lives, and decisions would generally be made by consensus. This form of government never lasts very long. Not only is it unfaithful to the New Testament pattern of designated elders with governing authority in the church, but it is also subject to much abuse, because subjective feelings rather than wisdom and reason prevail in the decision-making process.

Some final conclusions. It must be clear that the form of church government adopted by a church is not a major point of doctrine. Through the ages, Christians have lived comfortably and ministered very effectively within several different kinds of systems. In practice, we see that different types of church government systems seem to work fairly well. Nevertheless, a church can be more pure or less pure in the point of church government. We believe that the Presbyterian or Reformed system comes closest to the principles of church government found in Scripture.

The Reformed confessions have stressed that church government must be based on Scripture. *The Belgic Confession of Faith*, article 30 says, “We believe that this true church ought to be

governed according to the spiritual order that our Lord has taught us in his Word;" and article 32: "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." Reformed theology stresses all church government must be based on Biblical principles, while recognizing specific methods and procedures may vary depending on time, place, and culture.

This lecture on church government brings us to the following topic about the Offices in the Church. You are kindly invited to follow this next lecture. May God bless you.