

Church Membership 3 and 4

When contemplating joining a church one should seek to make sure that it is Scripturally sound and the only way we can do this is to study the claims made by various churches and compare them with the Word of God. More important than having a church whose government is, in our opinion, fully in line with the Bible is to have a church which preaches the true Gospel and whose office-bearers are godly, spiritual men.

1 There is a Need for Church Government

In Judges 17: 6 we read of a time when there was no king in the land of Israel and every man did what was right in his own eyes. The result was false worship and ultimately civil war in the nation. Tens of thousands of brave soldiers lost their lives and the tribe of Benjamin was almost wiped out. If we have no leadership or government in the church we will not be following the teaching of the Bible which tells Christians in Hebrews 13: 17, 'Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves.' If we act as individual Christians and join no church we cannot obey this Scripture and the result will be anarchy and loss both to ourselves and the Church of Christ.

2 Different Forms of Church Government

- Episcopacy

The word *episcopacy* comes from a Greek word which means 'overseer'. In episcopacy power comes from the top. The Roman Catholic Church is Episcopalian in its government. In it the pope appoints cardinals and archbishops who in turn appoint priests etc. The Church of England is also Episcopalian. Archbishops and bishops appoint rectors or vicars to the various congregations.

- Independency

Baptist and Congregational churches are independent churches. In them the local church is totally autonomous and when they cooperate with other congregations or churches they do so purely on a voluntary basis.

- Presbyterianism

This is the form of church government exercised in our church. It has many features in common with Independency but does not believe the local church is totally autonomous; rather that it is part of a wider fellowship and under the overall control of those chosen as leaders of all the congregations in that fellowship. The idea here is of *Interdependency* rather than Independency.

3 Presbyterian Church Government

- The word *Presbyterian* comes from the Greek word *Presbuteros* which means 'elder'.
- Elders were appointed in all the New Testament churches – Acts 14: 23, Titus 1: 5.
- A particular kind of elder is referred to in 1 Timothy 5: 17 – a teaching elder. This may well be the 'angel' of the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. An 'angel' is literally 'one who is sent' or a 'messenger.'
- It is clear that this office is only for men – see 1 Timothy 3: 1, 2; Titus 1: 6 and 1 Timothy 2: 12. The instruction in the last text applies to both teaching and ruling over men in the church. This does not mean that women are in any way inferior, they simply have different roles assigned to them by God. We are not misogynists.
- Elders are bishops according to the New Testament – see Acts 20: 17, 28; also Titus 1: 5-7. The word 'elder' refers to his office and the word 'bishop' to his work.
- In addition to elders we have deacons – 1 Timothy 3: 8-13. These were first appointed in Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 3: 11 makes it clear they also should be men. Some Presbyterian bodies have deaconesses, basing this on the Greek word in Romans 16: 1, but others believe the word refers to Phebe's work rather than any office she held.
- Presbyterian office-bearers are chosen by congregations in accordance with Acts 6: 1-3.

4 The Tasks of Presbyterian Office-Bearers

- The task of the teaching elder is to preach the Word of God as well as to rule in conjunction with the other elders – 1 Timothy 4: 13, 14; 1 Timothy 5: 17; Hebrews 13: 7.
- The task of all the elders is to nourish the people of God spiritually – 1 Peter 5: 1, 2. This is done through teaching, encouragement, prayer etc.
- The elders have to watch over the flock, just as David watched over his sheep – Hebrews 13: 17. This involves keeping a careful eye, praying for them, visiting when appropriate and warning when they see people going astray. When matters require discipline it is the elders who must act to exercise this.
- The elders are required to set a good example to the congregation – 1 Peter 5: 1-3; 1 Timothy 4:12.
- The elders join together in the overall government of the church – Acts 15:6, 22, 23
- The task of deacons is to look after the material and financial side of the work. *The Westminster Assembly* says they were 'to take special care in distributing to the necessities of the poor.'

5 Presbyterianism Interdependency not Independency

The Westminster Assembly teaches: 'The scripture doth hold forth that many particular congregations may be under one presbyterial government.' The proof of this assertion is set out with quotations from the Bible.

- The church of Jerusalem consisted of more than one congregation. There were multitudes of believers there, people who spoke different languages, many apostles and other preachers.
- That diversity made up one church – Acts 8: 1 speaks of the *church which was at Jerusalem*.
- The elders of the church at Jerusalem met with the apostles in church government – Acts 15: 6
- The church at Ephesus was very large and must have consisted of more than one congregation, yet was addressed as one church.

In Acts 15 we see a problem being dealt with that concerned all the churches. The matter was considered by both the apostles and after full discussion and meditation on the scriptures a verdict was reached. It is significant that elders were consulted, and as John Murray points out: 'It is all the more striking that the church should have resorted to such deliberation, and to this method of resolving an issue, since it was the era of special revelation.' The matter being resolved, the decision of the meeting was relayed, not just to the church at Antioch that had raised the issue in the first instance, but also to the churches in Syria and Cilicia, 'with every expectation that its instructions would be heeded and viewed as church law by all these churches' (Robert Reymond).

Practically speaking, there must be a limit to the reach of any church governing body. The Free Presbyterian Church in the United Kingdom is now a separate body from the Free Presbyterian Church in North America while maintaining close links, recognising one another's ministers, etc. and joining together in missionary endeavour.

6 Why *Free* Presbyterian?

The Free Presbyterian Church can trace its roots to the trial for heresy of Professor J E Davey in 1926-7. Davey admitted to teaching that on the cross Christ felt He had let the Father down; that Christ did not regard Himself as innocent any more than good; that the book of Revelation was in places more pagan than Christian; that the conquests of Joshua were absurdly exaggerated in the book of Joshua; that Abraham was the one historical figure among the patriarchs, although he did not think his name was Abraham; that the crossing of the Jordan was 'a poor imitation of the crossing of The Red Sea'. Professor Davey also taught that we cannot be certain there is a God; that Christ had a downward tendency; that He did not bear our sins on the cross, and that He was neither infallible nor omnipotent. He said he did not put his faith in a Galilean Jew with 'a certain size, shape, language and education.' Christ was 'the decentest chap we know.'

Professor Davey was tried for heresy by the Belfast Presbytery of the Irish Presbyterian Church on five counts, and cleared on all five. When the matter was brought to the General Assembly in June 1927 (incidentally by an Irish Presbyterian minister of 39 years' standing) Davey was cleared by 707 votes to 82.

Out of the heresy trial grew what is now known as the *Evangelical Presbyterian Church* along with some independent congregations, one of which, *Ravenhill Evangelical Church* called a young Ian Paisley to be their minister in 1946. When Dr Paisley was asked to conduct a Gospel mission in a Presbyterian church in 1951 the local Presbytery refused to allow the church to use its own hall for the mission. Many people, including elders, left the church and formed a Free Presbyterian church. The new congregation was joined by Dr Paisley's church and since that time the number of congregations in Northern Ireland has grown to more than fifty.

The word *Free* also draws attention to the fact that the Free Presbyterian Church is not attached to modern ecumenical bodies such as the *World Council of Churches*, or other councils of churches in Great Britain or Ireland. We believe in true evangelical ecumenism and many preachers from Baptist and other churches which share our view of the fundamentals of the faith and take a similar stand against apostasy have preached in our churches and are welcomed by us.