

# **AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Keith Underhill  
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For Dr. Edmund Clowney

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This paper concerns the question of authority in the church of Christ. It is this very question that is at the basis of the continuing differences in church polity between the Independent and Presbyterian churches. The view will be taken that the rather modified independency of the Reformed Baptist churches most closely approximates to the Scriptural norm. Whilst acknowledging the Reformation to be of unsurpassable value in reviving the true church of Christ, this paper builds on the conviction that the church was not sufficiently purified from all the extra-Scriptural traditions that had accumulated over the centuries, church polity being one of these. This is by no means to imply that the Reformed Baptist and similar churches are the only true churches of Christ that have existed and that exist today. Yet, because the Scripture must be implicitly followed at all points, the areas of disagreement must be fully exposed for continuing discussion on the basis of the word of God. It is true that this will summarily and so very inadequately be attempted in this paper.

The subject under discussion will be treated under the following three headings:

- A. The practice of Reformed Baptist churches.
- B. The Presbyterian teaching in two major areas of disagreement.
- C. The Biblical basis for the Reformed Baptist teachings.

## **A. REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCHES**

### **1. The Philadelphia Confession of Faith of 1742**

The following affirmations are made in the above Confession which relate to the authority of the church (chapter 26):

- (a) Concerning the self-sufficiency of every local church: "To each of these churches thus gathered ... He has given all that power and authority, which is in any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline ... (Matthew 28:17-18, 1 Corinthians 5:4-5,13, 2 Corinthians 2:6-8)."
- (b) Concerning the officers in the church: "A particular church, gathered and completely organized, according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members: and the officers appointed by Christ to be chosen and set apart by the church ... for the particular administration of ordinances, and execution of power or duty ... are, bishops or elders, and deacons (Acts 20:17,28, Philippians 1:1)."
- (c) Concerning the appointment of officers: "The way appointed by Christ for the calling of any person ... unto the office of bishop or elder in the church, is that he be chosen thereunto by the common suffrage of the church itself (Acts 14:23); and solemnly set apart by fasting and prayer, with imposition of hands of the eldership of the church (1 Timothy 4:14) ..."
- (d) Concerning the meeting and authority of synods: "In cases of difficulties or differences, either in point of doctrine or administration, wherein either the churches in general are concerned, or any one church, in their peace, union, and edification; or any member or members of any church are injured, in or by any proceedings in censures not agreeable to truth and order; it is according to the mind of Christ, that many churches holding communion together, do by their messengers meet to consider (Acts 15:2,4,6,23,25) and give their advice in or about that matter in difference, to be reported to all the churches concerned; howbeit, these messengers assembled are not entrusted with any church power properly so called; or

with any jurisdiction over the churches themselves, to exercise any censures either over any churches or persons; or (2 Corinthians 1:24, 1 John 4:1) to impose their determination on the churches or officers.”

## **2. The Faith Reformed Baptist Church, Media**

How do the principles of the Philadelphia Confession find their actual expression in a present-day local church? The following is a summary of some of the most salient points under discussion in the constitution of the Faith Church.

(a) The authority committed to the whole membership. In a case of church discipline involving dismissal from church membership, Matthew 18:15-18 is to be followed, and, “if the majority of the elders believe the accused to be guilty, the elders shall make an appropriate recommendation to the congregation for their action at a properly called congregational meeting. The congregation shall have the right to dismiss from the membership by a two-thirds vote of the members present and voting.” The same procedure is involved in restoring the penitent into full church privilege. Likewise, “the selection or retention of the pastor shall be voted on at a meeting of the congregation especially called for that purpose.” The recommendation of the other elders is not sufficient authority without the agreement of the membership.

(b) The special authority committed to the eldership. While the elders must seek the concurrence (or otherwise) of the congregation, it is the eldership that makes the decisions and on this basis recommends the action of the congregation. Thus, in dismissal from church membership it is first necessary that the majority of the elders consider the accused to be guilty before the matter is referred to the congregation for a final decision. Specifically, in the dismissal of the pastor, “The eldership shall have authority to consider this matter and make recommendations to the congregation, but it shall require a two-thirds vote of those present and voting at a constitutionally called congregational meeting ...”

## **3. The Reformed Baptist Association**

This association of independent Baptist churches is for the purpose of fellowship and cooperative efforts, especially in missions, publication of literature and education. The authority of such a body is very strictly guarded. As local church involvement in it is voluntary, “The Association has no right to make demands of any sort on a local church.” When requested by a local church, “The Association may give advice to the church, but has no power to enforce its judgement.” “Though the Association may not enforce any discipline upon a member church or individual member thereof, it may exclude a member church from its fellowship ... when doctrinal error, unholy living, or lack of interest in the Association persists in marking that church.”<sup>1</sup>

## **4. Reformed Baptist Foreign Missionaries**

In the work of foreign missions both the local church and the association have a part to play. All missionaries are ordained and sent out under the auspices of one particular local church

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<sup>1</sup> “But surely this implies concerted spiritual judgement – therefore discipline.” (Clowney) All such quotes by Clowney are the teacher’s comments on the paper. Do note that I was a Baptist student in a Presbyterian Seminary! And at two points in the paper I have taken the teacher to task.

having fully financial responsibility for its missionaries. Such independency does by no means preclude other churches in the association from helping in the needs. However, additional funds from other churches are sent to the local church concerned with the missionary. The association gives very close scrutiny to any proposed missionary candidate for any sent out will affect the ministries of other churches. In the ultimate event of establishing a local church on the field, the association and the church which sent the missionary will have no authority, but will be advisory. Its only possible action of disapproval toward a missionary will be withdrawal of support and fellowship and the revoking of the ordination.<sup>2</sup>

From these principles, confessed and applied, two major points of emphasis arise over against the Presbyterian form of church government:

- (a) The authority vested in the church congregation itself.
- (b) The minimal authority found in any gathering outside or above the local church, such as the synod or association.

## **B. PRESBYTERIAN TEACHING**

According to Witherow the six major principles in operation in the Apostolic Church are also practised in the true Presbyterian system of church government:<sup>3</sup>

- The office-bearers were chosen by the people.
- The office of bishop and elder were identical.
- There was a plurality of elders in each church.
- Ordination was the act of a presbytery, that is, of a plurality of elders.
- There was the privilege of appeal to the assembly of elders; and the power of government was exercised by them in their associate capacity.
- The only head of the church was the Lord Jesus Christ.

Only one of these principles is specifically denied and thus not practised in churches associated with the Reformed Baptists, that is, the power of the assembly of elders. But necessarily linked with this is the power of elders in the local congregation for this is the foundation of the authority of groups of elders. So Bannerman writes, "... the right of governing is deposited in the hands of the office-bearers of the Christian society, and not in the society itself, - a principle that paves the way for the elders of particular congregations meeting together ... for the exercise of a joint authority over the ecclesiastical societies which they represent."<sup>4</sup> To these office-bearers belong the power of the keys, that is, the right of ordinarily administering the necessary business of the church. Still, they did not deny that "... all the power and authority necessary for the church executing its functions and attaining its objects, lay radically and fundamentally in the church itself, in the company of believers."<sup>5</sup> These statements would appear to indicate that Presbyterian practice is really the same as that of the Reformed Baptist Church as defined above. But in the latter, concurrence of the congregation is required in many more cases than in the Presbyterian system, as is simply indicated by the more numerous congregational (or business) meetings. For example, in the Reformed Baptist churches a congregational vote is taken on such matters as the reception

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<sup>2</sup> "Total discipline!" (Clowney)

<sup>3</sup> Withrow, Thomas, *The Apostolic Church. Which Is It?* (Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1856/1967), p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> Cunningham, William, *Historical Theology* (Banner of Truth, 1862/1969), 2:538.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 2:536.

of new members into the assembly; dismissal from and restoration to church membership; special approval for a proposal to spend over \$1,000 on one item; decisions on serious differences of opinions that arise in the official board. Thus whatever be the theory, the actual role of the congregation in both systems is conceived of differently.

However, according to Bannerman, the real point of difference is "... the right of elders or presbyters associating together from different congregations, not only for the purpose of mutual consultation and advice, but for the exercise of a common government."<sup>6</sup> Two main arguments have been used to justify this doctrine over and against independency.

(a) The unity of the visible church. It cannot be disputed that the Scripture demands that the church of Christ should manifest visible unity. Is the organizational unity that Presbyterianism demands a right and necessary corollary of this undisputed doctrine? Bannerman concedes that this consideration by itself does not finally conclude the question. But he argues from the analogy that as baptism and ordination are not just into the local church, so neither is the rule in the church.

(b) Scriptural examples. The one example of the church in Jerusalem is taken by the Presbyterians to show that the word ἐκκλησία can denote more than one church, as they claim there must have been in the city of Jerusalem (Acts 15:4). The council at Jerusalem (Acts 15) does, according to Presbyterians, establish the authority and lawfulness of church courts, as there was an authoritative decision without the concurrence of the whole church (16:4).

Principles of Biblical interpretation on this question next need to be taken up and then a detailed look at the arguments from Scripture that are involved, in order that a conclusion might be reached.

## C. REFORMED BAPTIST TEACHING

### 1. Introductory Principles

(a) The Scripture must be the authoritative standard in all matters of faith and practice. There are those who elucidate a system of church government merely on pragmatic grounds, not believing the Scriptural data are adequate. This is not the case, for the Lord has not left us groping in the dark in these matters. The specific teachings in the Scripture and the examples of the outworking of these principles are adequate foundational principles for a system of church government. It is acknowledged, however, that "... there are certain circumstances concerning the worship of God and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence (1 Corinthians 11:13-14, 14:26,40), according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed."<sup>7</sup> The matters under discussion here, as will be shown below, can be deduced directly from Scripture.

(b) In any discussion which involves the apostolic church and its office bearers, account must be taken of the fact that some of these offices were extra-ordinary and therefore only temporary. It is generally agreed that the offices of apostle and prophet ceased with the apostolic age, as men called to such office were foundational in the church (Ephesians 2:20) being the organs through whom revelation came (3:5); and such revelation has ceased with

<sup>6</sup> Bannerman, James, *The Church of Christ* (Mack Publishing Co., 1869/1972), p. 317. "Is it common government when the association determines to withdraw the ordination of a missionary?" (Clowney)

<sup>7</sup> *The Philadelphia Confession of Faith 1742*, chapter 1, section 6.

the closing of the canon. This means that considerable caution must be exercised in applying teaching concerning these offices in the New Testament to the church of today. Such is the case in the example of the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15). The office of evangelist has also been considered by many to have been one only for the church of the apostolic age. Bannerman seeks to show the inseparable connection between the evangelists and the apostles, such as Titus and Timothy: "They are exhibited to us ... as the attendants upon the apostles in their journeys, and their assistants in planting and establishing the churches, acting under them as their delegates, and carrying out their instructions."<sup>8</sup> It was peculiarly to these office-bearers that authority over the whole church was committed, not just over one local congregation: "... any one apostle or evangelist carried about with him the liberty and power of the whole church; and therefore might baptize; yes, and censure an offender too, as if he had the presence and concurrence of the whole church with him."<sup>9</sup> (Acts 8:38, 1 Timothy 1:20) The precise extent of authority committed to the eldership must be examined in the light of this.

(c) A principle of great importance concerns the Old Testament and the use that should be made of it through the discipline of Biblical Theology. While the profound contribution of Biblical Theology to contemporary theological study can hardly be over-rated, care must also be taken to carefully exegete the plain statements of the New Testament. The organic nature of the two Testaments cannot be used to carry over everything in the Old to the New without a close examination of the underlying principles. Similarities of context and language must also be seen in the context of the widely differing external administrations between the church in the old and new covenants. There is no longer a national church or a theocracy, so that there are bound to be severe administrative changes. In an examination of the word πρεσβύτεροι (Acts 11:30) Clowney writes, "Since the many references to "elders" in Luke and Acts previously are to the eldership of the old Israel, we cannot escape concluding that these officers of the Jerusalem or Judean church function in similar manner."<sup>10</sup> This is a gratuitous argument which does not take into consideration the fact that Acts was written at least 30 years after the formal establishing of the church. So whether or not Luke in his two volume work (Luke-Acts) had previously given an account of the establishment of any new position of elder in the church, the readers would understand by Luke's reference, not the eldership of the old Israel, but that they had seen functioning in the previous 30 years. Likewise, the similarity of language with the procedures which were carried out in the synagogue does not necessarily imply a definite continuance of synagogue administration.<sup>11</sup> The New Testament stresses the difference between the old and new covenants (2 Corinthians 3:6-18, Galatians 4:1-7, Hebrews 8:13). Paul sees a relationship between believers under the old covenant and those under the new covenant as analogous to that between an heir waiting to possess the inheritance (Galatians 4:1-3) and one who has already possessed it (4:4-7). Thus the church has developed from childhood to maturity and the government has correspondingly changed. This is the point that Goodwin and Nye bring out in their introduction to Cotton's essay. In reference to the New Testament church they write, "They are ... more generally able, if visible saints to join with their guides and leaders in judging and discerning what concern their own and their brethren's consciences; and therefore Christ hath not now lodged the sole power

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<sup>8</sup> Bannerman, op. cit., p. 235.

<sup>9</sup> Cotton, John, *John Cotton on the Churches of New England* (Belknap Press of HUP, 1968), pp. 128-129.

<sup>10</sup> Clowney, Edmund, *A Brief for Church Governors in Church Government* (mimeo), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

of all church matters solely and entirely in the churches' tutors and governors as of old when it was under age He did." <sup>12</sup> Thus the New Testament must first be carefully examined.

## 2. Scriptural Teaching

### (a) The teaching of Jesus.

Only twice in the Gospel records is it recorded that Jesus specifically used the word ἐκκλησία (Matthew 16:18, 18:17). The first occasion was in response to the confession of Peter that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. Christ promised that He would build His church on Peter, as he represented the other apostles and as he remained true to his confession. The church, whether seen as in the process of erection, or as the end-product of all the elect gathered into one body, includes not only the office-bearers in the church but also all the other members, whether of the visible or invisible church. On this particular occasion it is specifically to the apostles, in the representative person of Peter (see John 20:23) that the keys of the kingdom of heaven are given. The keys have reference to the power of discipline in the church as well as preaching and administering the sacraments. These keys of Christ's kingdom have such a power of opening and shutting that they bind or loose, retain or remit. That which is included under the binding and loosing, the neuter ὅ, are things as sins (John 20:21) and persons as those who commit them. The binding and loosing occurs in the conscience of the sinner through the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments, and also in his visible membership in the church through judicial discipline. When convinced of his sin he is bound under church discipline, and when repentant, he again has free entrance into the fellowship of the church. It is important to understand these verses clearly as they are inseparably linked to the next statement of Jesus, which specifically concerns church discipline.

If before Jesus gave the power of binding and loosing to the apostles, here (Matthew 18:15-20) He gives it to the church. The church has been variously interpreted as the whole congregation or as the presbytery of elders. This then is a very vital text in understanding the concept of church government as the Lord has instituted it. Does Christ give power to the congregation in the discipline of its members? Or is authority solely given to the presbytery, so that the concurrence of the membership is not essentially required? The entire theme of Matthew 18 concerns the kingdom of heaven and the church, how to enter it (vv. 1-4), and the duties, responsibilities and warnings to the believer in his personal walk and fellowship in the world and the church (vv. 5-35). In particular, Christ deals with the problem when one brother sins against another. He is first to be dealt with in love and in private. If he refuses to hear this and receive the rebuke, two or three witnesses are to be taken. If this fails then "tell it to the church" (v. 17). Finally, if he is still unrepentant the church must use the power of discipline. The whole context points to the fact that here Jesus is dealing with brother-to-brother relationships in the fellowship of God's people.

Thus is there any reason here for assuming that the "church" refers not to the congregation, but to the eldership or presbytery? Clowney thinks there is based on the fact that the pattern instituted is close to the synagogue form. <sup>13</sup> In the synagogue, "... when matters were brought for judgement to the "assembly" they would be determined not by popular vote, but by a session of the elders of the people ..." While this is no doubt true, the context must not be overlooked. The previous use of the word church was a reference to the church as the

<sup>12</sup> Cotton, op. cit., p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> Clowney, op. cit., p. 6.



meeting of believers (Matthew 16:18). The succeeding context also rules it out where any meeting of two or more believers,<sup>14</sup> whoever they are have the power of deciding such cases. This is precisely what happened in the case of the incestuous Corinthian. Paul had already pronounced judgement on him, but the act of excommunication was for the assembled congregation (1 Corinthians 5:3-5). Any distinction between the congregation and the office-bearers in what Jesus says here is totally foreign to the context. It is before the duly assembled congregation that the unrepentant man is to be finally brought. First he is dealt with on a one-to-one basis, and then before other witnesses and then on the largest scale possible, the whole congregation to which he has been joined. If the climax were just one or two elders, then the numerical progression would be absent which is so obviously intended so that at each stage the iniquity is shown to be all the greater. That he is to be disciplined by the whole congregation is involved in the fact that he is to be to them “as a gentile and a tax collector.” It is the whole church that breaks fellowship with the offender, not just the office-bearers. Thus Lenski summarizes:

The church (congregation) is thus the final court of appeal. Those who would place above it a still higher authority: the pope, a bishop, some church board, a house of bishops, a synod composed of clerics, or these combined with lay delegates, go beyond the word of Christ and the teaching of the apostles. In a difficult case the local congregation may seek counsel and advice, but the final jurisdiction in regard to a sinning member belongs to the congregation, and no one ought either by direct or indirect means to nullify that jurisdiction.<sup>15</sup>

(b) Scriptural examples.

It has been already noted that to the apostles in particular was given an authority that extended over every local congregation. Yet, while possessing such great authority, it is very apparent that where they possibly could have the consent and concurrence of the church in the exercise of any act of church power they willingly took it and joined with it; such as the ordination of Timothy (1 Timothy 4:14, and 2 Timothy 1:6) and the excommunication of the incestuous Corinthian (1 Corinthians 5:4-5). There was a clear recognition of the place of the church itself in the determination of these matters.

- i. 1 Corinthians 5, 2 Corinthians 2:5-11. Paul pleads for the removal of the incestuous man (1 Corinthians 5:2) when the people of God are assembled together (v. 4). Their inactivity shows the fact that they have not understood<sup>16</sup> that it is they who are to judge those who are inside the church (v. 12). That they are commanded to do this implies that they have the right to do it. When the man showed signs of genuine repentance then Paul wrote back to beseech the Corinthians to receive him back into their fellowship (2 Corinthians 2:5-11). As the whole church had bound the man through discipline, so now they were to loose him by receiving him back as a brother.
- ii. Paul is concerned about making a collection for the poor in Jerusalem, seeking to spur on the Corinthians by the magnanimous example of the church of Macedonia. Although Paul had the authority to command and to appoint those who should be in charge of the collection, it is actually the churches who appoint their own representatives. Lenski notes that χειροτονέω signifies to vote by holding up the hand,<sup>17</sup> so that it appears that his name

<sup>14</sup> “The two or three reflects the law of witness.” (Clowney)

<sup>15</sup> Lenski, Richard, *St. Matthew's Gospel* (Augsburg, 1964), p. 703.

<sup>16</sup> “?” (Clowney)

<sup>17</sup> Lenski, Richard, *1 & 2 Corinthians* (Augsburg, 1963), p. 1151.

was proposed in church after church, and because of his splendid reputation all voted for him to be their representative. Thus in seeking to encourage the Corinthians in an exercise of Christian benevolence, he has proper regard to the church of Christ as being made up of sovereign local churches (see also 1 Corinthians 16:1-4).

- iii. Acts 11:27-30. It is not the apostles in Jerusalem who are managing this relief effort for the poor brethren in Judea; rather it is to the elders of the churches that the relief is sent through Barnabas and Saul (v. 30). Again it is clear that the apostles interposed in the local church affairs only when it was necessary, although they had the power in every instance.

(c) The authority of the elders.

All are agreed that the Bible clearly shows that it is the liberty of each congregation to choose its own pastor, for it is in the very context of the local assemblies that Christ manifests the gifts of ministry that the whole body might be edified. Gifts are given unto God's people to be used in the church where they are primarily (Ephesians 3:18, 4:11-14, 1 Corinthians 12:27-28). It is the church assembled that should recognize the gifts given and then separate those gifted to the work that the Lord has called them (Acts 13:1-3). It was in every church that Paul and Barnabas visited on their first missionary journey that they appointed elders (Acts 14:23). Being commissioned by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28) their authority is limited by Christ alone, and not the congregation which set them apart. Plurality of elders in a congregation is the norm in the New Testament (Philippians 1:1, Acts 14:23, 20:17,28, Titus 1:5,7) but it never appears that one bishop ruled over more than one congregation. But did a group of elders from different churches exercise a wider control over all their respective churches together as a synod?

Presbyterians argue that this is so because the many churches in the large cities of Jerusalem, Corinth and Ephesus are often grouped together and simply called "the church" (singular) in that city, and the elders thus have rule over the church in the whole city (Acts 15:4,6, 20:17). The assumption is that because there were so many people converted, in Jerusalem for example, no one house church could have held them all, yet the elders had jurisdiction over every congregation, which itself had its own individual elders. In each case the point can be hotly disputed:

- i. Jerusalem. About 120 persons seem to have been the number of disciples Jesus left behind (Acts 1:15). To this number were added 3,000 souls who were converted under the preaching of Peter on the Day of Pentecost (2:41). It cannot be determined how many of these left Jerusalem after the festival had finished. But daily the Lord was adding to the church in Jerusalem those He was saving (2:47). Then, in the sequel of Peter having healed the lame man in the temple, many hear his preaching of the word and believe. The number of 5,000 men could refer to those who were present to hear the word; those who actually believed; or the number of men who were now converted in Jerusalem and who had identified themselves with the other believers. Whatever the actual total number of believers, it was high, and it is recorded that even after this time the Lord continued to add to the church more than ever (5:14). It is notable, however, that their meeting place was not a house but in the temple, in Solomon's portico (3:11, 5:12). Although it is clear that the continued preaching of the word had powerful effect (6:7) yet it is a gratuitous assumption to say that the people of God were constituted in house churches, each one of which had its own office-bearers. Even many years later the whole church in Jerusalem met together to make decisions (15:4,12,22). τὸ πλῆθος is later used in the chapter to describe the church or congregation at Antioch (v. 30, see v. 12)

and is often used as a technical term<sup>18</sup> to include the whole body of the members of a religious community (Acts 19:9, 21:22 p<sup>74</sup> x<sup>\*c</sup> C<sup>2</sup> A E). Whether the believers met separately in their houses can neither be denied or affirmed positively from these Scriptures, but it is clear that all the believers in Jerusalem did meet together and the elders had the rule over this local congregation.

ii. Corinth. There can be no doubt that however large the number of believers was in Corinth they actually did all meet together, for the apostle writes, “if ... the whole church assembles” (1 Corinthians 14:23), a statement which assumes the possibility of such an occurrence. This appears to be a quite proper interpretation, as Paul has addressed the letter to “the church of God which is at Corinth” (1:1).

iii. Ephesus. The elders from Ephesus travel to Miletus to bid Paul farewell (Acts 20:17-18) and Paul proceeds to encourage and warn them (vv. 18-35). We have no idea how many elders made this journey or whether they all came. But Paul speaks to them corporately as guardians of the flock, that is the church of God (v. 28). The presence of numerous flocks is not implied, and certainly the letter to the church there can best be understood in the light of a single congregation, for some of the instructions would not be so relevant if many separate churches were being referred to (see 4:2-3, 5:19,21).

(d) The Council of Jerusalem.

Cunningham spends much time in discussing the Council of Jerusalem believing it has an intimate connection with a consideration of the government of the church. Most Congregationalists dismiss it as not having clear teaching on church government, but this is not so, and the principles must be applied in the church of every age.<sup>19</sup> The following points must be clearly noted:

i. The function of apostles. Cunningham states “... the apostles did not act here as inspired and infallible men, but simply as ordinary ecclesiastical office-bearers, in conjunction with the elders or ordinary pastors.”<sup>20</sup> While the statement is formally true it is misleading, for the apostles, whenever they functioned as office-bearers in the church, always did so as apostles, and certainly never just as elders (1 Timothy 2:1,7, 2 Timothy 4:1, Acts 4:5, etc.). Thus the decision they arrived at in conjunction with the elders of the church at Jerusalem could be imposed on all the churches, just because the apostles had that very authority (16:4). Clearly today there is no analogous situation as there are no para-ecclesiastical office-bearers.

ii. The church in Jerusalem. The whole assembly of the church at Jerusalem was present at the Council. With the apostles and elders they welcomed the delegation from Antioch (15:4); they listened to the apostles and elders deliberating together but did not take part in the discussion (v. 12); they cooperated in the choosing of men to circulate the decision that was reached among the churches in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia (v. 22). It is agreed with Cunningham that it was only “... after the apostles and elders had made up their minds as to what was the mind and will of God in this matter, and what decision should be pronounced, (that) the subject was brought before the people.”<sup>21</sup> Yet the judgement and agreement of the congregation was a vital part of the procedure. This is exactly the position in Reformed Baptist

<sup>18</sup> Arnt & Gingrich, p. 674.

<sup>19</sup> Cunningham, op. cit., 1:43-78.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 1:45.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 1:55.

Churches, for the matters are first decided by the eldership and then put forward for acceptance or rejection by the congregation.

iii. The relationship between Antioch and Jerusalem. Dissention arose in the church at Antioch over the matter of circumcision, and although the apostle Paul was there no decision was concluded (Acts 15:4). It was only natural that in seeking the help of other brethren in this problem, that they should turn to the body of the apostles in Jerusalem and to the church in the city where they were. However, the decision came voluntarily from the church at Antioch itself. It was not an appeal to an already established court of justice which had been set up for that very purpose. Only two of the churches were involved though the decision encompassed many more (v. 23). That such action was voluntary and not the normal way for dealing with church problems is evidenced by the lack of other examples in the Scripture. This Council thus does not point to the correctness of having permanent organizational structures in the church having progressively more authority over the people of God. Large sections of the people of God were not taken into consideration in this Council and some who were had no representation on the Council. Thus it is only by analogy, and not by express principle, that justification for a general assembly encompassing the whole church can be found here. Clear justification is here, however, for unusual and voluntary structures to decide problems that one church is unable to solve. However, even the decisions arrived at did not go so far as they might have.

iv. The Council and discipline. It is interesting to note that the decision of the Council did not involve excommunication of those involved in heresy. The only decisions made were doctrinal, and these alone were imposed on the churches.<sup>22</sup> Just as Jesus laid down (Matthew 18:17) it was left to the individual congregations to discipline offenders, those who did not accept the decisions of the Council. Thus there is here no warrant here for synods and general assemblies having the power to discipline either individuals or whole churches. Under this structure of government there was visible unity in the church so it is a false argument to assume that the necessity of visible unity in the church must involve para-ecclesiastical authority structures. Independency of local congregations with a certain interdependency when insoluble problems arise in a particular assembly is in full consonance with the clear Scriptural demands for unity.

## **C. CONCLUSIONS**

### **1. The Nature of Independency**

Each local congregation is autonomous, each having its own officers responsible to the head of the church, the Lord Jesus Christ. The elders do not merely exercise power which properly belongs to the congregation, although they do exercise it on their behalf, but their authority is from the Lord (Acts 20:28). Yet without the consent and concurrence of both the elders and the congregation nothing can be considered a church act.<sup>23</sup> An analogy to the relationship between the power of the elders and the congregation might be seen in that between the judge and the jury. The judge is the one in whom final authority lies and he seeks to direct the jury towards a correct decision of guilt or innocence. When the jury has finished its deliberations, it is the judge who pronounces the verdict. It has been explained that in the

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<sup>22</sup> Cotton, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

eldership power is properly authority, and in the people it is privilege or power.<sup>24</sup> When, however, the local congregation decides a matter, that decision is ratified in heaven (Matthew 18:17-18). When a local church fails to act if an offense is committed by one of their members, the church also is guilty (Revelation 2:14-15,20). The brethren of a local congregation are free to decide for themselves, amongst other things, the following:

- i. their officers (Acts 2:23, 6:3,5-6).
- ii. sending forth an elder to help other brethren (Philippians 2:25).
- iii. refusal of reception into membership until a difficulty has been removed (Acts 9:26-27).
- iv. in the case of a public scandal, the power and privilege to join with the elders (Matthew 18:15-17, Acts 11:2-18, 1 Corinthians 5:4-5).
- v. to go to another church for help (Acts 15:2-23).
- vi. to withdraw from fellowship (Romans 16:17).
- vii. communion with other churches which does not involve subjection (Romans 16:1-2, Acts 15:3, Romans 15:26-27, Acts 13:1-3).

## **2. The Nature of Association**

There is great need for churches to be in fellowship one with another, and this the Reformed Baptist Association seeks to bring about. But fellowship is not dependent upon authority, as has already been shown. But such fellowship cannot go to the extent of interfering actively in other churches. The extent of power is to withdraw communion, and this is not optional but necessary for the health of the church of God.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.