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What Is Church Government?

Sean Michael Lucas

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Dedicated to my friend and colleague, David B. Calhoun, professor emeritus of church history at Covenant Theological Seminary, who loves the church of Jesus Christ in its Presbyterian expression throughout the world.

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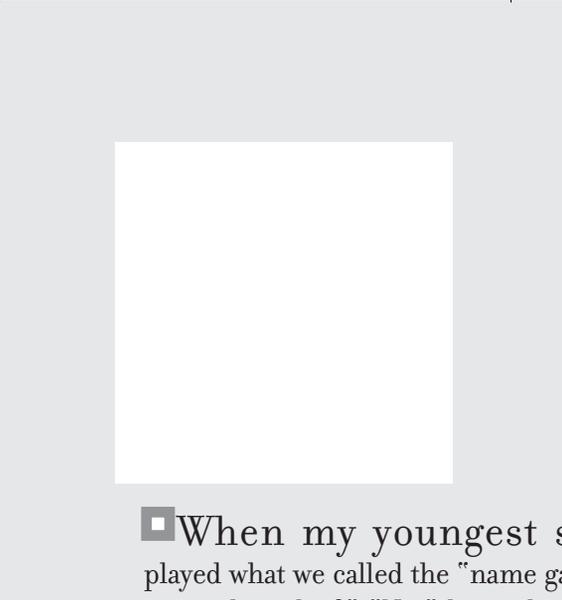
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■ When my youngest son was two years old, we played what we called the “name game.” I would ask him, “Are you a sheepdog?” “No,” he replied. “So, are you a whippoorwill?” I questioned him further. “No, Daddy,” he said with a giggle. “Are you a bass fish?” I asked again with a smile. “No!” he shouted with relish. “Then who are you?” I finished. He laughed, “I’m Ben Lucas!” Even my two-year-old knew that his name conveys an identity that places him in the world.

Yet many people within and outside our Presbyterian churches fail to reckon fully with the identity the *Presbyterian* name conveys. There are beliefs, practices, and stories that shape us as Presbyterians—experiences that convey a particular approach or identity through which we encounter the world.¹ Typically we associate beliefs concerning God’s sovereignty, human depravity, and Christ’s particular redemption with what it means to be Presbyterian. However, those beliefs were not the main reasons our forebears were Presbyterian. Rather, Presbyterianism had its roots in a conversation about the nature and governance of the church.

The word *Presbyterian* comes from the New Testament Greek word *presbyteros*, usually translated “elder” (see Acts 11:30; 14:23; 1 Tim. 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1, 5). Focusing on the New Testament usage of the word *elder* has led many to argue that the original form of church government in the apostolic church was Presbyterian—that is, oversight of local churches by elders who provided spiritual direction and discipline. However, simply

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pointing out the word's usage does not fully establish the case for Presbyterian church government. In fact, I suggest that the Presbyterian understanding of church government relies on as full a range of biblical and theological resources as does our understanding of the doctrines of salvation.

My hope is that this brief examination of Presbyterian church government will encourage us to commit ourselves anew to the challenge that the nineteenth-century American theologian James Henley Thornwell laid down so long ago: "We shall, therefore, endeavor to do what has never yet been adequately done—bring out the energies of our Presbyterian system of government."² This is all the more important because our biblical, Presbyterian understanding of church government is ultimately necessary for the preservation of those gracious doctrines that we know as the "Reformed faith." It is also necessary because this biblical teaching of what the church is and how it is to function in the world can help to meet the deep needs of our postmodern generation.

CHRIST RULES AS THE CHURCH'S KING

In Scotland our Presbyterian forebears had a motto that summarized their understanding of the nature of the church and its relationship to the state: "for Christ's crown and covenant." The "covenant" part of that motto had to do with a national covenant signed by Scots Presbyterians who desired a unified church with England. The "crown" part of the motto expressed a profound truth on which Presbyterianism rests: Christ Jesus himself is King over his church. He has "crown rights"—his is the ultimate authority as the head and ruler over his people. No one person—whether pope or pastor or president—can usurp the place of King Jesus over his church.

I have a pastor friend who tells a story of how we can unwittingly lose sight of this truth. At a vacation bible school the teacher

Christ Rules as the Church's King ■

was leading small children in making crowns. My friend's two daughters were in this VBS class, and they dutifully made the crowns. Afterward the teacher began her lesson. "Class, what kind of person wears a crown?" The class responded, "A king! A queen!" The teacher went on, "And class, who is the King over the church?" One of my friend's daughters shouted out, "Well, my daddy is the king of the church!"

We often mistakenly believe that pastors or elders are kings of the church, the true rulers of the church. But Presbyterians have insisted on this great truth: Jesus Christ is the sole King over his church. He wears the crown, and no one else does. Historically, this confession has meant that Presbyterians have disagreed with Roman Catholics concerning the role of the pope. We've confessed that "there is no other head of the Church but the Lord Jesus Christ. Nor can the Pope of Rome, in any sense, be head thereof" (WCF 25:6).³

Because Jesus is King, he has all authority over his people, the church. As the Resurrected One in Matthew 28:18 he declared, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." He is the one who has all authority, all power; he is Lord over all and is seated at God's right hand (Acts 2:33; Phil. 2:7-9). The apostle Paul tells us that Jesus is head over the church, the source and ground of all authority for Christ's own body (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; Col. 1:18; 2:10).

Jesus is now executing his role as King by "calling out of the world a people to himself, and giving them officers, laws, and censures, by which he visibly governs them" (LC 45). Jesus himself governs and rules over his people today. The nineteenth-century Scots Presbyterian theologian James Bannerman put it this way:

Within the province of the Church, the Lord Jesus Christ is the only Teacher, Lawgiver, and Judge. If doctrine is taught, it is taught because he has revealed; if ordinances are administered, they are administered in his name, and because they are his; if government is established and exercised, it is through his appointment and authority; if

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saving grace is dispensed, it is dispensed through the virtue and power of his Spirit; if a blessing is communicated, it is because he blesses.⁴

Whether we recognize it or not, Jesus continues to exert his rule over his people—it is his ministry to his people for the expansion of his kingdom to the praise of his glory.⁵

HOW CHRIST RULES HIS CHURCH

The question naturally comes to us—is Jesus really ruling over his church? We sometimes look at our churches and wonder how in the world this can be. We see pastors and church members engaged in moral or financial scandals; we have experienced the pain of church ruptures; we see what appears as injustice carried on in church courts. How is it that Jesus is truly ruling over his church?

In order to get toward an answer, we need to think about the word *church* and how it is used in the Bible, especially in the New Testament. There are a couple of different ways that the Greek word *ekklesia* is used for *church*. One way might be called the “ideal” way in which the church is considered: the body of God’s people through space and time who were truly elect, genuinely regenerate, and effectually united to Jesus, receiving all the benefits of his mediation. For example, when Jesus says in Matthew 16:18, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it,” he means that the church as the society of the elect will not be overwhelmed by the devil, but will ultimately triumph over principalities and powers (see Eph. 6:11–12). Likewise, in Ephesians 5:25–27 when Paul says, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . . so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish,” he means the church ideally considered, made up of the elect