**The government of the true church**

Text: 1 Timothy 3:1-13

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**Scriptures:** Ephesians 4:7-16; 1 Timothy 3:1-13

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 352, ‘O church arise’, 48, 391, 117

**Series:** Doctrine of the Church (#4) – Belgic Confession (Article 30)

**Theme:** The true church is governed by Christ her Lord according to the spiritual order in Scripture with ministers/pastors who preach the Word and administer the sacraments together with elders and deacons who are Biblically qualified to lead.

**Proposition:** Be assured that the true church is governed by Christ through His appointed servants, ministers/pastors, elders and deacons. Join a local true church if you are a Christian.

**Introduction**

The Gloriavale Christian Community (also known as the Cooperites after the founder and leader Neville Cooper) is a small and isolated Christian group who live together on the West Coast of the South Island in New Zealand. In 1995, Neville Cooper was jailed for almost a year on sexual abuse charges. {Cooper died of cancer on 15 May 2018, aged 92}. Those who leave the community are sometimes shunned and denied contact with family members who have not left Gloriavale. The Apologetics Index, a Christian cult-watching organisation, refers to Gloriavale as a "cult, both theologically and sociologically", stating that "theologically, this group is a cult of Christianity, as its theology - as well as its practices based on that theology - places it well outside the boundaries of the Christian faith.”

The Cooperites are an example of a religious group who have been led by a single leader. The same pattern has been followed by many false churches over the course of history. For example Unification church members (or Moonies) follow Sun Myung Moon, t**he church of Scientology**follows the teaching of **L. Ron Hubbard.**

Why is the leadership of a ‘church’ by a single person descended from Adam always unbiblical, unwise and often very destructive for those within such a ‘church’ who are subjected to spiritual tyranny? It is because of the fallen state of the human heart (e.g. Jer 17:9).

Guido de Brès, author of the Belgic Confession, knew personally about the damage that having a single man in authority of the church could do. When he wrote the words of the confession in 1561, Pope Pius IV (from the Duchy of Milan) was in power. Medieval theology taught that because the Pope governed the Roman Catholic church as a successor to the Apostle Peter, the Pope was preserved from the possibility of error in doctrine. The doctrine of ‘papal infallibility’ was later defined at the First Vatican Council of 1869-1870.

It was against this background of the church being ultimately ruled by one man, that de Brès wrote these words: *We believe that this true church must be governed according to the spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in his Word.* In the last three sermons in this preaching series, which address the topics covered by Belgic Confession articles 30-33, we’ll see what the true church, which is governed according to the spiritual order of Christ looks like. Today, in the first of these three sermons, we focus on the government of the true church under three headings:

1. Christ, the Head of the church
2. The three offices of the church
3. The qualifications for leaders of the church
4. **Christ, the Head of the church**

We are especially aware of our nation’s system of civil government – a parliamentary democracy - at the moment in the lead up to the General Election on 17th October 2020. New Zealand has a single-house legislature, the House of Representatives, usually with 120 members. The position of prime minister belongs to the person who commands the confidence of the majority of members in the House of Representatives.

The government of Old Testament Israel was different to ours. When Israel was led out of slavery in Egypt, she was called to be a theocracy – a ‘holy nation’ ruled by God. From the start of the reign of Saul, the nation of Israel was ruled by a king. This system of government is a ‘monarchy’ – that is the undivided rule of one person. The history of this chosen people in Scripture shows the repeated failings, not of the Lord God who remained faithful, but of the human kings who disobeyed their God and thereby led the people astray. Even King David, ‘*a man after God’s own heart*’ (1 Sam 13:14; Acts 13.22) failed. His own family and the nation suffered greatly.

In Christ Jesus, God’s only begotten, beloved Son, the God-man, the government systems of theocracy and monarchy are combined in what is termed the ‘Christocracy’ – the rule of Christ. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He said "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*” (Matt 28:18). As a result of the perfect obedience of Christ to His Father’s will, even to the point of death on a cross, God has highly exalted Jesus and bestowed on him the name that is above every name (Phil 2:8-9).

The day is coming when every person who has ever lived will see the glory of the Risen King Jesus and all will bow in submission to Him (Phil 2:10). Now, the glory of the Lord Jesus is seen in His rule over the true church: His bride whom he loved and gave Himself up for (Eph 5:25). Christ is the Head of the church and He rules her as the King who loves, provides for and protects His people.

The essence of the rule of Christ is revealed in His own words of self-disclosure: “*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*” (John 10:11). A good shepherd must care about the safety of his sheep more than He cares about his own safety. A good shepherd must be gentle and tender with the weak and wounded in his flock. A good shepherd must be firm and directive with sheep who go astray and get themselves into dangerous and damaging situations. A good shepherd must be strong and courageous to battle with enemies who would harm his sheep.

Jesus Christ, the Head of the true church, is The Good Shepherd. He rules local churches through multiple men; each man providing a check-and-balance of mutual accountability with the others so that no one man can assume ultimate authority of the church. This pattern of Christ rule through ‘under-shepherds’ in the church is called ‘presbyterian’ or ‘presbyterial’ (terms which comes from the Greek word ‘presbuteros’ meaning ‘elder’). Elders are called by the rule of Christ to ‘*shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock’* (1 Peter 5:2-3).

In His perfect wisdom, God has decreed that His church be led by a group of men, frail and imperfect, prone to sin and error, insufficient in themselves for the task. These men have authority in the church only when they are under the authority of Christ the Head. They have strength and ability to lead only when and because Christ their Lord supplies all that they need to serve as His under-shepherds. Church government rule by multiple elders is the only Biblical form of church government. Two other forms of church government which have been practiced over the past 2000 years are ‘hierarchical’ and ‘congregational’.

In the ‘hierarchical’ system there are different levels of descending authority from one person at the top down to many at the bottom. As we’ve already seen, the ‘hierarchical’ system is fundamentally flawed because it ultimately relies upon one single sinful person. Hierarchical systems are found in the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern orthodox churches. This system also governs Seventh-day Adventists, the Salvation Army, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons (‘the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints’).

In congregational church government systems, leadership is exercised almost entirely through the majority decisions of the church membership. This system is essentially democratic. The great weakness of the ‘congregational’ form of church government is the inclusion of all church members, irrespective of their spiritual maturity and lifestyle in the rule of Christ’s body.

In church history some groups have reacted against abuses in hierarchical church leadership and have adopted the congregational model. Today, most Baptist churches and many non-denominational groups have predominantly congregational systems of church government.

Presbyterian (or Presbyterial) church government is Christ’s wise rule for His church. This system avoids both the dangers of hierarchical and congregational church government. Whilst the Presbyterial or Presbyterian form of church government is based on the eldership of a local church, elders are not the only leaders in the church as we’ll see in our second point.

1. **The three offices of the church**

In our reading from Ephesians 4:7-16 we heard that Christ has given gifts to His church for the purpose ofequipping ‘*the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ*’ (v12). Every Christian has a role in the church in the ‘office of believer’ – the church is a ‘priesthood of all believers (2 Pet 2:9).

An office is a ‘position of authority or service’ in the church. There are special offices which some men hold in addition to their ‘office of believer’. Ephesians 4:11 reveals that Christ*gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers”*. Let’s look at these people who Christ gifted to the church:

Firstly, **Apostles –** They werewitnesses of the resurrection of Christ, or those who received a special revelation of the risen Jesus like Paul. The Apostles were commissioned by Christ to be founders of the New Testament church (Acts 1:21-22; 1 Cor 15:1-9). The term ‘apostle’ is also used in a broader sense in Scripture of those sent out as delegates to local churches before all the books of the Bible had been written (2 Cor 8:23; Phil 2:25).

Secondly, **Prophets –** The New Testament prophets communicated God’s special revelation to the church (Acts 15:32; 21:9-11; 1 Cor 14:3). Apostles and prophets had a foundational function in the New Testament church (2:20), however these roles did not continue beyond the time when all the 66 books of the Bible had been completed and were circulating amongst the churches. In his letter to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul has already explained that the combined church community of Jews and Gentiles, the church of the ascended Lord Jesus Christ, has been “*built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone*” (2:20). After the initial period of establishment of the New Testament church, the Word ministry of these ‘offices’ has continued to be conducted by pastors and teachers.

Thirdly, **Evangelists –** those especially gifted to proclaim the gospel outside of the covenant community of the church, like Philip ‘the evangelist’ (Acts 21:8). Whilst there is no longer a specific office of evangelist, the gift of being able to proclaim the gospel outside the church is still being given liberally by Christ to His Body.

Fourthly, **Pastors and teachers –** The word ‘pastor’ literally means ‘shepherd’ and refers to the ministry of spiritually protecting and providing for those in a church congregation. We see this pastoral gift in Peter’s exhortation to elders to ‘*shepherd the flock of God that is among you*’ (1 Peter 5.2) with the encouragement “*And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory*” (1 Peter 5:4). We often refer to elders as ‘under-shepherds’, willingly serving under Christ’s delegated authority. In the Greek language in which the New Testament was first written, ‘pastors’ and ‘teachers’ share a single ‘definite article’. We see this reflected in our English translations with the absence of the word ‘the’ before ‘teachers’ in verse 11. This suggests that ‘the pastors and teachers’ were one group ‘pastors who are also teachers’ or else two groups with overlapping functions.

The temporary ‘offices’ of Apostles, Prophets, and Evangelists passed away when the Word of God was completed towards the end of the 1st century AD, at the end of what is sometimes called ‘the apostolic age’. We see the continuation of the pastor/teacher office in the New Testament, for example: Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every city (Acts 14:23). Titus was called to do likewise (Tit 1:5). Timothy was commissioned {through the laying on of hands of the council of elders (1 Tim 4:14)} to ‘*preach the Word*’ (2 Tim 4:2).

In addition to elders and ministers who preach and teach, there is a third office, that of deacon. Deacons, ‘*men full of faith and of the Holy Spirit*’ (Acts 6:5), were set apart in the early New Testament church to serve especially in practical matters within the church.

Some Presbyterian/presbyterial churches combine the pastor/teacher role into the office of elder, viewing the minister as a ‘teaching elder’ whereas others separate the office of pastor/minister from that of the elders. When the office of deacon is added to this it leads to either a ‘2 office’ or ‘3 office’ view.

The Belgic Confession expresses the ‘three office view’ and describes the ongoing three ‘offices’ in the true church in these words: *“There should be ministers or pastors to preach the Word of God and to administer the sacraments, there should also be elders and deacons who, together with the pastors, form the council of the church”.* The qualifications for ministers/pastors, elders and deacons are revealed in Scripture in 1 Timothy chapter 3 and are the subject of our third point.

1. **The qualifications for leaders of the church**

At this time as the congregation is being called to submit nominations for men to fill the offices of elder and deacon. How will you decide whose name to put forward? It might be tempting to suggest men who you like, agree with on many things, or men from your own family grouping. There can be many reasons why we might select one person over another, however, the right way to select men for these offices is (using the language of the Belgic Confession) when *faithful men are chosen in agreement with the rule that the apostle Paul gave to Timothy.* These words are a reference to the list of qualifications given in 1 Timothy 3:1-13.

There are many details in this passage which give the Biblical qualifications for ministers (as ‘teaching elders’), elders and deacons in the church – what follows in this third point is a brief summary. For more detail, go to our church website, select sermons from 2014 which I preached on 1 Timothy and listen to the following 6 sermons:

* “Do you desire to lead” on 1 Tim 3:1
* “The equilibrium of an elder’ on 1 Tim 3:2-4
* “The shepherd’s lifestyle” on 1 Tim 3:2-7
* “A strange love” (about hospitality) on 1 Tim 3:3
* “The high calling of a personal servant” on 1 Tim 3:8-10
* “The special service of women and men in the church” on 1 Tim 3.11-13

Firstly men, it is good to want to be an elder or ‘overseer’. Do you? This desire is good not only because the church needs elders but also because this leadership role is a ‘noble task’. This is a godly aim for any man of God and a good motivation for ongoing growth in godliness.

An elder must be ‘above reproach’. This does not mean perfection; however it does mean a life lived beyond legitimate accusation and public scandal. Being ‘above reproach’ describes a person who has nothing in their words, actions or deeds upon which an adversary could seize to make a lawful charge. A person who is ‘above reproach’ has a good reputation and visibly upholds a high moral standard. No one can exert leverage on such a person! No one can hold anything over them: “dig up dirt on” on them. If someone throws “mud” at an elder/overseer, it should slide off them like a fried egg on a Teflon coated frying pan!

An elder is to be ‘the husband of one wife’: literally ‘a one-woman man’. The key idea here is that a man is devoted and faithful to his one wife. This does not mean that an elder must be married, but if he is, he will be known to be a husband who loves one woman – that is his own wife!

An elder is also to be (v2) “*sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable*”. All three terms speak of a demonstrated stability of character. ‘Sober-minded’ speaks of complete clarity of mind and resulting good judgment. It describes a person who is watchful to remain free from the intoxicating effects of the world, the flesh and the devil. Such a person avoids excess, extravagance and over-indulgence of his appetites and passions. This self-controlled person exercises restraint over their own impulses, emotions and desires. The word ‘respectable’ means ‘orderly’ or ‘well-behaved’. This is not mere outward respectability but a lifestyle which reflects the inward characteristics of a sober, self-controlled character. So these three words – sober-minded, self-controlled and respectable speak of a stability, consistency, and reliability of character.

In addition to these an elder must be hospitable – literally he must ‘love strangers’. His home should be open and welcoming to others so that he can get to know them well, understanding them as individuals and in doing so love them.

He must also be able to teach. He must know the Bible well and be able to teach others the truths of the Lord. Notice that this is the only skilled-based qualification – the others all relate to character.

In contrast to being sober-minded, self-controlled and respectable, here are four characteristics of instability in life: drunkenness, violence, being quarrelsome and loving money. The state of drunkenness exhibits a lack of self-control, both of bodily movements, speech, thought and moral judgement (Prov 23:31-35). An elder is not to have an unstable pattern of lifethrough addiction to any substances or through regular excessive consumption of alcohol. Gentleness, not violence must characterise an elder. He must not be contentious and quarrelsome. The overseer is to be a man who avoids retaliation, no matter how cruelly provoked, instead seeking to settle all conflicts peacefully, reasonably, and without animosity. An overseer is to be zealous in his desire to be at peace with all people, if possible, so far as it depends on him (Rom 12:18). He must not be a lover of money.

An elder must be a person who is a good steward of all the material resources he owns and not become controlled by them. “*He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect*”. The role of a man as head of his household is really that of a shepherd….to guide, to lead, to protect, to provide. The idea is that the children in his home will be known for their obedience and generally good behaviour, the elder must shepherd his children so that they respond faithfully to the careful government of his home.

“*He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgement as the devil.* An elder must not be a new believer, but one who has grown in humility over time as he has walked with the Lord. *He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil’s trap*”. An elder is to have a good reputation in wider society so that He himself will not be trapped by Satan’s schemes to bring down leaders with the aim of destroying the church.

Now let’s look at the qualifications for deacons (1 Tim 3:8). *“Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain”.* A deacon is to be “worthy of respect”. He is to be honourable and dignified. He is not to be double-tongued. He is not to say one thing to one person and something different to another. It is easy to understand what “*not indulging in much wine*” means. He is not enslaved or addicted to drink, but self-controlled in his physical appetites. He is not to be “greedy for dishonest gain” but self-controlled in heart attitude. The deaconate candidate must fair and honest in his dealings.

A deacon must know the faith well. *They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.* A deacon must be a man who believes the revealed truths of Scripture. He must be doctrinally sound; he must also hold these truths of the faith personally; they must determine the course of his life. A deacon must be a man who bows the knee now to King Jesus. Deacons must be men like Stephen, Philip, Prochurus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus (Acts 6); of good repute, full of the Spirit. A deacon must be a man whose conscience is clear because by faith he believes that his sins have been fully dealt with at Calvary.

“*And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless*” (1 Tim 3:10). After such men are identified within the congregation as being respectable in their behaviour, firm in their faith, they are to be tested, examined and approved (cf. 1 Cor 16:3). Character is best ascertained when under duress. A man is not qualified by being in office. He must be qualified **before** being in office through an orderly and careful evaluation. The testing is to be a thoughtful and careful evaluation of a man’s life by a congregation aware of these needed qualifications.

* Is the prospective deacon a mature and growing Christian?
* Is there anything that disqualifies the prospective deacon from serving?
* Is the congregation supportive of the potential deacon entering the office. This is determined (as with elder elections) by congregational vote.

“*Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things*”. A qualification for a deacon involves the suitability of his wife to be able to share with him in his diaconal work. The wife of a deacon must be as committed and serious as her husbands. If a married woman does not have the character qualities of being worthy of respect, not a malicious talker, temperate and trustworthy, then her husband should not be ordained as a deacon.

This has been a very quick run through of the Biblical qualifications for office-bearers in the church. They are the Christ-like qualities which we are all called to put on. The Session have invited and encouraged congregational members to nominate men for the offices of elder and deacon. Have you done so?

Be assured that the true church is governed by Christ through His appointed servants, ministers/pastors, elders and deacons. This is not a perfect church, but it is a ‘true church’ governed not by one person descended from Adam by *governed according to the spiritual order which our Lord has taught us in his Word.* If you have not already joined this church, I encourage you to work towards doing so. AMEN.