

## Ecclesiastical Government (8<sup>th</sup>)

(Today's podcast is the beginning of studying the Scriptures to see what is taught regarding the government of the New Testament congregation.)

Previously we reviewed what the Protestants believe concerning the government of the church and congregations as found in the *Westminster Confession* and under "The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government" of that confession.

Now we will look somewhat at the *London Baptist Confession of Faith* as adopted in England in 1689 and later adopted by the Baptists in America in earliest days of this nation. The Philadelphia Baptist Association had Benjamin Franklin print it in 1742. Chapter twenty-six, article seven states: "To each of these churches thus gathered, according to his mind declared in his word, he hath given all that power and authority, which is in any way needful for their carrying on that order in worship and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe; with commands and rules for the due and right exerting, and executing of that power." Notice that God gave to each congregation "all . . . power and authority" to carry on "that order in worship and discipline, which he hath instituted for them to observe," as ordained by the Scriptures. Therefore, as we previously stated, the congregation is the only ecclesiastical authority instituted by the Lord. The scriptural passages referenced to support this premise are Matthew 18:17-18; I Corinthians 5:4, 5, 13; II Corinthians 2:6-8.

The passage in Matthew chapter eighteen deals with an offended brother (obviously a fellow member of the congregation) seeking reconciliation with the offender. The verses referenced concludes by saying, "And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church:" (congregation) "but if he neglect to hear the church," (congregation) "let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Therefore, when a congregation follows the Scriptures in ecclesiastical government it is ordained and sanctioned by God. The Lord did not place His assembly under any synod or council, ecclesiastically or civilly, to rule over it. (Please know that we are not saying that a congregation is to ignore and disregard other congregations and brethren or act so independently that it does not care what anyone else says or believes. Obviously, like-minded brethren and congregations should have fellowship and care for each other. However, the ultimate authority is the congregation and not some ruling board or power over it. Clearly, Caesar [or any and all worldly governments] has no authority over the congregation of the Lord. We shall have more to say about these things later.) This passage in Matthew should be clear to all that there can be no higher power than heaven, and since heaven (i.e., God) recognized that the congregation has the final word there can be none above it. In addition to this passage, it should be noted that when our Lord said that He would build His congregation and that the "gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18), He further declared "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Therefore, Matthew 18:18 and Matthew 16:18 are simply affirming the same truth concerning the authority of God on earth, and that authority is found in the congregation of the Lord as it governs and rules according to the testimony of the Holy Scriptures.

The second place to support the congregation being the only ecclesiastical authority comes from I Corinthians chapter five. The report was of a sin that was worse than what was practiced among the Gentile world. It was the sin of fornication where a man was sleeping with "his father's wife," I Corinthians 5:1. If that was not bad enough, the congregation was "puffed up" or proud of it. Verse six says that they were "glorying" or bragging about the sin. The apostle Paul instructs the congregation to excommunicate or exclude this man from the congregation. Verses four and five says, "In the name of our

Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” Notice that the Holy Spirit did not inspire Paul to write to that a synod or some council was to be formed to exercise discipline on the man. The Lord directed that the congregation was to perform this discipline. Paul, as an apostle, did not demand the congregation to perform this exclusion, though he had “judged already” (I Corinthians 5:3) regarding the matter. Paul said that when the congregation were assembled (“gathered together”) with the same disposition (“spirit”) that he had, then they were to perform the discipline on the man. Also, notice that this discipline was with the “power of” the “Lord Jesus Christ,” and that the day of judgment was in view. In connection with this, verse thirteen, says, “But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person.” Since this man was “among” the congregation, they (the congregation) were to put him away. It was not a committee, synod, group of ministers, the state, or any authority apart from, or over, the congregation that exercised this power. It was the congregation collective that performed this function. The authority of the congregation to discipline this man was not only with the power of the Lord to remove him from membership, but he was also delivered “unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” Regardless of what all is involved by this action, I believe it can be said that modern so-called evangelical religion knows very little, if any, of the power and authority of the congregation of God. Many, if not the majority, of members of a congregation today do not believe that anyone, much less the congregation, has any right or business to judge them for anything. They believe they can live their lives as they want and no one has any right to say anything about it. Sadly, hardly is it heard of today when any congregation performs discipline of any kind. We seem to be living as Israel was in the day of the judges: “every man did that which was right in his own eyes,” Judges 21:35. The Lord inspired the apostle Peter to say “that judgment must begin at the house of God,” I Peter 5:17. It seems that the congregation of God, as a whole, has lost its power and authority, and it is enslaved to denominational hierarchies and worldly organizations and functions according to business (and governmental) guidelines, and have cast off the holiness of the Lord as ordained by God in the Holy Scriptures. Too many ministers, as well as the members, are violating all of I Corinthians 5:13. They are judging and preaching about how bad the world is (those that are without), and they are failing to scripturally judge those within and, thereby, filling up their congregations with “wicked” people.

The third passage supplied by the *London Confession* is II Corinthians 2:6-8. It says, “Sufficient to such a man *is* this punishment, which *was inflicted* of many. So that contrariwise ye *ought* rather to forgive *him*, and comfort *him*, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm *your* love toward him.” Obviously, our Lord would have us to think of the discipline performed by this same congregation as recorded in chapter five of the first epistle. We see from this passage that the punishment inflicted on this man was “of many.” This Greek word means “more in quantity” or by the majority. In other words, the man in I Corinthian chapter five was disciplined by a majority vote. It appears that the man repented of his sin and was in deep sorrow for it. The Lord has Paul to instruct the congregation to restore the man lest he be “swallowed up with overmuch sorrow.” This was to be done by the congregation and not by any ecclesiastical authority over and above the congregation. It appears from II Corinthians 7:12 that congregational discipline is as much, if not more, for the health and benefit of the congregation as it is for the guilty or offended party. It says, “Wherefore, though I wrote unto you, *I did it* not for his cause that had done the wrong, nor for his cause that suffered wrong, but that our care for you in the sight of God might appear unto you.” The objective of congregational discipline is not only for the health and benefit of the erring individual but for the strength and soundness of the congregation.

When congregations are functioning according to the teachings of the Word of God, maintaining the government as ordained by the Lord, proclaiming the gospel truth, and performing the ordinances as

commanded by God, it is indeed “the house of God, ... the church” (congregation) “of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth,” I Timothy 3:15.