

## **2015/1/Study3: How The Church Is To Be Ruled (1 Pet. 5:1-4)**

by BS Poh

We hold to the form of church government known traditionally as Independency, which is different from Episcopacy, Presbyterianism and Congregationalism. We believe in the priority of the ministry, the validity of ruling elders, the unity of the elders, and rule by elders with congregational consent. We reject the Absolute Equality/Parity view of the eldership and congregational democracy.

### **3.1 The Biblical Form of Church Government**

(i) Implications of “the sole authority of Scripture”.

- If Scripture is the sole authority in all matters of faith and practice, church government should follow its teaching as well.

: The “Regulative Principle” is usually applied to worship, when it should cover government as well. The Regulative Principle states that whatever is taught in Scripture should be followed. The Permissive Principle teaches that whatever is not forbidden by Scripture may be done.

- Based on the sole authority of Scripture, we believe there is a divinely ordained form (“jus divinum”) of church government.

: The Bible is the only, and sufficient, law of God to govern the church.

(ii) The forms of church government.

- Historically, there have been four forms of government, the last two often treated as one.

: (i) Episcopacy, where there is hierarchy of individuals who have the power of rule (Anglican, Methodist, RC).

: (ii) Presbyterianism, where there is hierarchy of committees of individuals who have the power of rule (Presbyterian groups, Reformed churches in Europe, the Borneo Evangelical Church also known as SIB).

: (iii) Independency, where the local church is autonomous, the power to rule is in the church, the execution of rule is by elders, involving congregational consent (Reformed Baptists churches, Plymouth Brethren churches, Congregational churches).

: (iv) Congregationalism, where the power of rule is in the church, the congregation makes the decisions, and the church officers carry out the decisions (General Baptist churches, most independent churches).

**Note:** Congregational churches hold to Independency as their form of church government.

Congregationalism as a form of church government is held by most independent (spelled with lower case "i"), i.e. free/autonomous churches.)

(iii) If Jesus Christ is the Head of the church, and only Mediator between God and man, He must be submitted to as our Prophet, Priest and King.

- Prophethood speaks of doctrine (including Confession of Faith and preaching), priesthood speaks of worship (including meetings and prayer), and kingship speaks of church government (including form of government, discipline, and missions).

- Since Christ is the only Head of the church (Eph. 5:23-24; Rev. 1:12-13), and the Bible the only law, Episcopacy and Presbyterianism have to be rejected.
- : Other factors decide which, Independency or Congregationalism, is the Bible form.

### **3.2 The Rulers and the Manner of Ruling.**

- (i) The rulers of the church are elders, who rule as a body, led by the pastor.
    - Priority of ministry: All pastors are elders, but not all elders are pastors (Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 5:17). Usually, there is one pastor, who leads the eldership, and is full-time in preaching and teaching.
    - Validity of ruling elders: Ruling elders do not preach on a regular basis, and generally are not full-time officers. They are those who lead, “to stand before” (Rom. 12:8), and engage in administrations, “to steer” (1 Cor. 12: 28). They share the rule with the pastors (1 Tim. 5:17).
    - Unity of eldership. The elders together rule, having authority over all aspects of church life (1 Tim. 5:17).
  - (ii) The elders are the ones who rule.
    - The word “proistemi”, to rule (1 Tim. 3:5; 5:17) means to stand before in rank, to preside. The word “hegeomai”, to have the rule (Heb. 13:7, 17) means to lead or command with official authority.
    - It follows that elders must take initiatives and make decisions for the church.
  - (iii) With congregational consent.
    - The examples of Scripture show that the decisions of the elders do not become the decisions of the church until the congregation gives its consent, or “common suffrage” (Acts 15:6, 16:4 cf. 15:22, 23, 25; 1 Cor. 5:4-5; 2 Cor. 8:19).
    - The congregation has a duty to agree, unless there are good reasons not to. In the odd occasions when there is no congregational consent, the elders must wait while teaching and persuading the congregation of the rightness of the decision. Circumstances often change, and new factors come to light, affecting the elders and/or the congregation on the decision.
- = We reject the Absolute Equality/Parity view of the eldership, where all elders are pastors.  
= We reject congregational democracy, where the congregation rules.  
= We practise rule by elders, with congregational consent, in which there is priority of the ministry of God’s word. This is Independency.

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