

BIBLICAL PRESBYTERIAN PRESBYTERIES
Rev. Professor-Emeritus Dr. Nigel Lee

Foundation

Presbyterian government is ecclesiastical rule by mature Presbyteries of Presbyters or Elders -- in and from Presbyteries responsible for associated Sessions confederately constitutive of Synods or General Assemblies. As to its inception, Presbyterian government is not just apostolic but also primordial in its antiquity. For unlike the Campbellite "Disciples" or that congregationalistic sect named "The Church of Christ" (alleged to have been established only in 33 A.D.) -- and unlike the tyrannical Papal Church (launched only during the sixth century A.D.) -- the very representative Presbyterian Church of the Triune God was established, unto all eternity, already in 4004 B.C.

There is very great merit in seeing the Eternal Trinity -- the One God with His many Members -- as being the first and the last Presbytery. He Himself is also the Foundation of all presbyterial government -- and of His one Church with its many Presbyteries, all baptized into His Triune Name.¹ The Triune God is a Presbytery.² Also His Church should reflect this.³

Definition.

A 'Presbytery' (or *Presbuteerion*) is a group of Ruling Elders, including some Preaching Elders, which governs the Church of the Triune God.⁴ Such may be either local, *e.g.*, the Session; regional, *e.g.* the Classis, usually named 'Presbytery' in English; provincial, *e.g.*, the State Assembly; or the National, *e.g.*, the Great Synod.

Thus the head in each of ten households chooses from those heads one mature male, to be the Elder-over-ten in that local tithing or ward. Every five Elders-over-ten then in turn choose one Elder-over-fifty. Next, each two Elders-over-fifty choose one Elder-over-hundred. Thereafter, each ten Elders-over-hundred choose their one Elder-over-thousand. Finally, all of the Elders-over-thousand are convened to constitute the largest national Ecclesiastical Parliament of the people of God -- "the General Assembly of the Church of the firstborn."⁵

Dimensions

Clearly, then, a Presbytery -- just like the Trinity -- could consist of as few as three Members.⁶ Yet it should represent perhaps a minimum of five Sessions of Christ's Church. Compare Exodus 18:25's "Rulers-of-fifty" in the Older Testament -- with the five Preaching Elders in the Newer Testament which Acts 13:1 mentions within the Presbytery of Antioch. Optimally, however, some seven Sessions are repre-

sented in a Presbytery.⁷ No Presbyteries mentioned in the Word of God, ever exceed that latter size.⁸

In many Patristic Churches there were approximately seven Congregations associated in each Presbytery., and then again seven such Presbyteries associated together in one Regional Synod. Thus that famous authority on the Westminster Assembly, Rev. Dr. Alexander F. Mitchell, notes in his essay on the early pre-papal *Keltic Church* that the latter was 'High' Presbyterian. Mitchell explains that. "in South Britain, there were 'Bishops' [alias Over-seers].. with distinct 'Sees' [alias Sessions]. There were at least seven in Wales at the time of the conference.. with Austin of Canterbury [around A.D. 600].... They seem to have been [guided] by 'Tribal Bishops' ...[and were] located in groups of seven near each other."

Even as late as the eighth century, as Sir Winston Churchill points out, it was Alcuin of York who was the chief adviser of the Continental Emperor Charles the Great. Also Möller observes that Alcuin was a worthy representative of Celto-Culdee learning on Anglo-Saxon ground.

Alcuin gave discourses on the Trinity (Whom he said governs the *trivium* of grammar and rhetoric and dialectic), and Who further operates through the fullness of creation (north and south and east and west) as reflected in the *quadrivium* of arithmetic and geometry and astronomy and music. Alcuin also held that Christ Himself is the Master of the Academy, and that the above-mentioned 'seven arts' are an introduction to the septuple fullness of the Lord's Holy Spirit.⁹

Regionality

Local Sessions of Presbyters meet under moderatorship of a Preaching Elder.¹⁰ Between such Sessions and the General Assembly -- stand all the regional Presbyteries. Each of these latter is also named 'Classis' or *Kleesis* (alias that which is convened from the called -out Church or *Ek-klees-ia*). For the meetings of those presbyterial 'Classes' or 'Regional Presbyteries' are regularly called, in order to discharge the functions mentioned in our next section.

In many respects, the regional Presbytery is the most important of all presbyterial bodies. For it stands between the Elders-over-ten locally, and the Elders-over-thousand provincially -- and it very clearly links the former to the latter.¹¹

Functions

Every regional Presbytery should manifest at least the following functions. A, training & ordaining and discipling & disciplining Preaching Elders for the Christian Church.¹² B sending Ministers alias Missionaries into established Congregations and also creating new ones.¹³ C, hearing appeals from local Sessions of Elders.¹⁴ D, sending sufficient delegated representatives to the General Assembly.¹⁵ E

administering the various decisions of the General Assembly.¹⁶ F, advising and also direction the local Sessions in matters of regional concern.¹⁷

The Westminster Assembly's Form of Presbyterian Church Government

This was an original Presbyterian Standard for all of the British Isles. It is yet, for very many Churches, even today. Here follow some of its wise words.

"The Scripture doth hold out a Presbytery in a church.¹⁸ A Presbytery consisteth of Ministers of the Word, and such other Publick Officers as are agreeable to and warranted by the Word of God to be Church-Governors -- to join with the Ministers in the government of the Church.¹⁹ The Scripture doth hold forth that many particular Congregations may be under one presbyterial government.... That these many Congregations were one Church, and that they were under one presbyterial government, appeareth.²⁰

"The Scripture doth hold out another sort of [General] Assemblies for the government of the Church, beside classical and congregational -- all which we call *Synodical*.²¹ Pastors and Teachers and other Church-Governors (as also other fit persons when it shall be deemed expedi-ent) are Members of those Assembles which we call *Synodical*, where they have a lawful calling thereunto. Synodical Assemblies may lawfully be of several sorts -- as provincial, national, and oecumenical. It is lawful and agreeable to the Word of God that there be a subordination of congregational, classical, provincial and national assemblies -- for the government of the Church" of the Lord Jesus Christ, here and now, on Earth.

Ordination not by Congregations nor by Ministers but by Presbyteries

"Ordination" explains Westminster, "is the act of a Presbytery.... The power of ordering the whole work of ordination, is in the whole Presbytery.... Whether these Congregations be fixed or not fixed... is indif-ferent as to the point of ordination²²....

"It is very re-quisite that no single Congregation that can conveniently associate, do assume to itself all and sole power in ordination.... There is no ex-ample in Scripture that any single Congregation which might conveniently associate, did assume to itself all and sole power in ordination....

"There is in Scripture example of an ordination in a Presbytery over divers Congregations; as in the Church of Jerusalem, where were many Congrega-tions. These many Congregations were under one Presbytery, and this Presbytery did ordain. The Preaching Presbyters orderly associated either in cities or neighbouring villages, are those to whom the imposition of hands doth appertain for those Congregations within their bounds....

"No man ought to take upon him the office of a Minister of the Word without a lawful calling²³.... By the Word of God...no man ought to take upon him the office of a Minister of the Gospel, until he be lawfully called and ordained thereunto....

"Considered by the Presbytery, they are to proceed to enquire touching the grace of God in him, and whether he be of such holiness of life as is requisite in a Minister of the Gospel; and to examine him touching his learning and sufficiency, and touching the evidence of his calling to the Holy Ministry; and, in particular, his fair and direct calling to that place."²⁴

"He shall be examined touching his skill in the original tongues, and his trial to be made by reading the Hebrew and Greek Testaments.... If he be defective in them, enquiry shall be made more strictly after his other learning, and whether he hath skill in logick and philosophy... [and] what authors in divinity he hath read....

"Trial shall be made in his knowledge of the grounds of religion, and of his ability to defend the orthodox doctrine...against all unsound and erroneous opinions, especially these of the present age; of his skill in the sense and meaning of such places of Scripture as shall be proposed unto him in cases of conscience and in the chronology of the Scripture and the ecclesiastical history.

"If he hath not before preached in publick with approbation of such as are able to judge, he shall at a competent time assigned [to] him expound be-fore the Presbytery such a place of Scripture as shall be given him."²⁵

Biblical examples of General Assemblies and Presbyteries

Finally, here are some of the General Assemblies and their Presbyteries -- as stated or implied in the Word of God In the Older Testament, we find local Sessions of Elders, regional Presbyteries, and the National Assembly of Israel.²⁶

In the Newer Testament, we find the following. A The General Assembly of Palestine, with her Presbyteries of Judah & Samaria & Galilee.²⁷ B The General Assembly of Syria, with her Presbyteries of Antioch & Phoenicia & Damascus.²⁸ C The General Assembly of Cilicia --with her various Presbyteries of Galatia & Pamphylia & Cyprus *etc.*²⁹ D, The General Assembly of Greece, with her Presbyteries of Corinth & Macedonia & Dalmatia.³⁰ And E The General Assembly of Italy, with her Presbyteries of Puteoli and Rome *etc.*³¹

As the *Westminster Form of Church-Government* insists: "The Church of Jerusalem.. .consisted of more congregations than one.³² All those congregations were under one presbyterial government; because they were all one Church.³³ The several congregations in Jerusalem being one Church, the Elders of that Church are mentioned together for acts of government³⁴.... The Scripture doth hold forth that many congregations may be under one presbyterial government...by the instance of the Church of Ephesus."³⁵

To these above two Presbyteries, we ourselves would further add three more. First, the Presbytery of Corinth.³⁶ Then second, the Presbytery of Rome with some five small Congregations.³⁷ And third, the "model" Presbytery of Asia Minor, comprising precisely seven Congregations with the risen Lord of the Church Himself walking in the midst of that seven-pronged "candlestick."³⁸

May Jehovah-Jesus Himself also today give His Presbyterian Church worldwide many bright Presbyteries like that seven-pronged golden candlestick! And may the several Congregations within each of His Presbyteries worldwide now see Him, our living Lord and Saviour, walking in their very midst in the bright and powerful presence of His sevenfold stream-like Spirit!³⁹

ENDNOTES

- 1) Mt. 28:16-20; Eph. 4:3-6; I Cor. 12:3-20.
- 2) Gen. 1:1-3 & Mt. 28:19 with Dan. 7:9-3 & 9:24-7 and Lk. 3:21-28.
- 3) Gen. 1:1-28f; 6:9-18; 9:1-12; 14:13f; 24:2; 50:7; Ex. 3:16f; 4:29f; 5:6-21; 12:21; 18:22; 17:5-7; 18:12-26; 19:1-7f; 20:1f; 21:22f; 24:4-9f; Num. 11:16; Dt. 1:13-16; 16:18; 17:6-10; 19:11-15; Ezra 5:5-11; 6:7-14; 10:8; Neh. 2:16; 4:13-21; 7:4-7f; Ps. 105:22; 107:32; Ezek. 8:1; 14:1; 20:1; 33:21; Mt. 18:15-20; Acts 5:21; 7:28; 11:20; 13:1f; 14:23; 15:2 to 16:5; 20:17-28; 21:18-25; 22:5; Rom. 11:16-26; 12:4-8; 16:1-17; I Cor. 12:3-28; Eph. 4:3f; Phil. 1:1; Col. 4:14f; I Tim. 3:1-8f; 5:17-22; Tit. 1:5-11; Heb. 2:12; 10:23-29; 11:1-4f; 12:22f; 13:7,17,20,24; Jas. 1:1; 5:14f; I Pet. 1:1 & 5:1-5; II Pet. 2:1-5f & 3:2-7f; I Jh. 2:13f; 2:19; II Jh. 1-5; III Jh. 1-11; Rev. 1:1f; 2:1 to 3:20f; 4:4-10f; 5:8-14; 11:16f; 19:4f; 21:12-14f; 22:16f.
- 4) See I Tim. 3:1-4 & 4:14 & 5:17-22.
- 5) Gen. 14:13-20f; Ex. 18:12-25; Deut. 1:13-17; II Kgs. 1:9f; Mark 6:40; Luke 9:14; Acts 6:1-7; 14:23 to 16:5; Heb. 12:22f.
- 6) Matt. 18:15-20 & 28:19 *cf.* Deut. 19:12-15.
- 7) Rev. 1:1f to 3:22.
- 8) Num. 11:16-25; II Sam. 8:15-18; 20:23-26; I Kgs. 4:1-4; Ezra 10:8-14; Est. 1:10f; Luke 10:1-7.
- 9) *Cf.* Isa. 11:1f; Rev. 1:4-5; 1:11-20; 3:1f; 4:5-11; 5:6f.
- 10) II Kgs. 6:32f and Ezek. 8:1; 14:1; 20:1 *cf.* Rev. 2:1,8,12,18 & 3:1,7,14.
- 11) Ex. 18:12-21 *cf.* Deut. 1:13-17.
- 12) I Tim. 4:14 *cf.* II Tim. 1:6 & 3:14—17 & 4:1-5
- 13) Acts 13:1-5 & 14:23.
- 14) Ex. 18:12-26 and Deut. 16:18 & 17:8-13 & 19:12f *cf.* Matt. 18:15-20.
- 15) Acts 14:23-27 & 16:4f & 21:18-27 *cf.* Heb. 12:22f.
- 16) Acts 15:30 & 16:4-5 & 21:18-27. 17) Rev. 2:1 to 3:22. 18) I Tim. 4:14 & Acts 15:2-6.
- 19) Rom. 12:7f & I Cor. 12:28.
- 20) Rev. 2:1-6; Acts 20:17-28. 21) Acts 15:2,6,22f. 22) I Tim. 4:14.

- 23) John 3:27; Roman. 10:14f; Jer. 14:14; Heb. 5:4. 24) *Cf.* Heb. 5:4 & John 3:27.
- 25) See I Tim. 1:18f; 5:17-22; 4:12-16; II Tim. 1:3-6; 2:2,15,24f; 3:14f; 4:1-5.
- 26) *Cf.* Ex. 18:12-25; Num. 11:16-25; Deut. 1:13-17; 19:12-15; 31:9f.
- 27) John 10:16 & Acts 1:13 & 8:25f & 9:31 & 11:27.
- 28) Acts 9:19f & 11:11-22f & 13:1f & 15:23. 29) Acts 15:23 & I Cor. 16:1.
- 30) Acts chs. 16-17 & Phil. 1:1f & I-II Thess. & II Tim. 4:10.
- 31) Acts 28:13-17f & Rom. 16:3-16. 32) Acts 5:14; 6:1f; 9:31. 33) Acts 8:1f & 15:5.
- 34) Acts 11:30 & 21:17f. 35) Acts [6:1;] 18:19,24,26; 19:18f; 20:17,25,28-31; I Cor. 16:8,9,19.
- 36) I Cor. 1:2 & Rom. 16:1,16,"28." 37) Rom. 16:3-15.
- 38) Ex. 25:31-37; 37:17-23; I Cor. 16:19; Rev. 1:4-20; 2:1,7; 3:1,6; 22:16.
- 39) Isa. 11:1-3; 11:10-15; 30:26-29; 60:19f; 61:1-2f; Rev. 1:4f; 1:10-20; 2:1,7,11; 2:17,29; 3:6,13,22; 4:2-10; 5:5-14; 19:4; 21:10-14,23-26; 22:1-5; 22:16-17.

Rev. Professor-Emeritus Dr. Francis Nigel Lee
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Francis Nigel Lee was Professor of Philosophy at Shelton College in New Jersey; Visiting Lecturer at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Ms.; Staley Distinguished Visiting Lecturer at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis; Research Scholar-in-Residence at the Christian Studies Center in Memphis; Academic Dean of Graham Bible College in Bristol, Tn.; and Professor of Theology at the Queensland Presbyterian Theological College in Australia.

Preacher, Theologian, Lawyer, Educationist, Historian, Philosopher and Author, Lee has produced more than 330 publications (including many books) -- and also a multitude of long unpublished manuscripts. Apart from an honorary LL.D., he has twenty-one earned degrees -- including eleven earned doctorates for dissertations in Education, Law, Literature, Philosophy and Theology.