

# The four church leadership systems

Additional study material

*A discipleship training to equip Christians for works of service, so that the Body of Christ may be built up (Ephesians 4:11-16).*

# 47

## THE FOUR CHURCH LEADERSHIP SYSTEMS

|   |      |
|---|------|
| A. THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP SYSTEM (STRUCTURE) AND THE BIBLE | p. 1 |
| B. THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP SYSTEM IN CHURCH HISTORY         | p. 3 |
| C. THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP SYSTEM AND THE BIBLE        | p. 5 |
| D. THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP SYSTEM IN CHURCH HISTORY    | p. 6 |
| E. THE SYNODAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP SYSTEM AND THE BIBLE               | p. 8 |
| F. THE SYNODAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP SYSTEM IN CHURCH HISTORY           | p.10 |
| G. THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH LEADERSHIP SYSTEM AND THE BIBLE          | p.15 |
| H. THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH LEADERSHIP SYSTEM IN CHURCH HISTORY      | p.17 |
| I. CLOSING REMARKS, CONCLUSIONS, SUMMARY AND BIBLE REFERENCES       | p.27 |

These notes are about the various church leadership systems that can be distinguished from each other. They are in the main the following:

- the episcopal system
- the congregational system
- the synodal system and
- the presbyterian system.

With these terms we are *not referring to particular denominations*, but to different church leadership systems or structures.

In this study we describe the nature of these four church leadership systems. We list the most important arguments for these systems and make comments on these arguments. We also point out how these systems have functioned in Church History<sup>1</sup>. From the discussion arises a definite preference for one of these church leadership systems. The main intention is to give information to help us form an opinion. In this exchange of thoughts it is not our intention to rewrite the issue of church leadership, but rather to help us *build our own church on the basis of the Bible* in a way that Jesus Christ is the Lord of the Church.

These notes discuss each church leadership system separately with a summary of the subject and a list of the most important passages in the Bible at the end.

### A. THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP SYSTEM (STRUCTURE) AND THE BIBLE

#### 1. The argument for bishops.

The Episcopal Churches (denominations) argue that the word “bishop” (Greek: episkopos) is not a *task* (“overseer”), but a *position (an office)* above the office of “elders” (Greek: presbyteroi, cf. English “priests”).

#### Comment.

The word “episkopos” means: “overseer” or “supervisor” and is found in the Bible. Jesus Christ is “the Overseer of our souls” (1 Peter 2:25). The apostle Judas had “a supervising task” (Greek: episkope) (Psalm 109:8; Acts 1:20). The elders (Greek: presbyteroi, cf. English: priests) of the church of Ephesus (Acts 20:17; 1 Timothy 5:17), the church of Philippi (Philippians 1:1), the churches on Crete (Titus 1:5,7) and the churches in Asia Minor (1 Peter 5:1-2) are “the overseers” and “shepherds” of their congregation (Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 3:2). Thus, Jesus Christ, the apostles of Jesus Christ and the elders of the churches had “a supervising task”. The New Testament clearly teaches that “the task of supervising or overseeing” was never a separate office, but a task of Christ, a task of the apostles and a task of the elders of a local congregation.

Only during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. churches separated “the task” of the elders from the elders and accorded this task to a new and higher position or office than the office of elder in the Church, namely the office of “a bishop”. There is no biblical authority to appoint bishops (and later metropolitans, archbishops and popes) in the Church.

<sup>1</sup> See Delta PLUS study 25 “The historic development of Church leadership”

## 2. The argument for a hierarchical leadership system (structure).

The Episcopal Churches argue that the Old Testament leadership system was a hierarchical structure and consisted of one high priest and several priests and several Levites. They assume they find this Old Testament leadership system also in the New Testament: one bishop (a New Testament high priest), priests (New Testament priests) and deacons (New Testament Levites).

In Church History the Episcopal Churches extended the hierarchical leadership system by adding the offices of “a metropolitan” (a bishop of a large city), “an archbishop” (the bishop supervising the bishops in a particular country) and “a pope” (the bishop supervising all archbishops and everyone in the Roman Catholic Church. In the Orthodox Churches the highest office is called “a patriarch”).

### Comment.

The leadership system in the Old Testament belongs to the Old Testament Ceremonial Law (consisting of a temple, a high priest, priests, Levites, animal sacrifices, circumcision, purification rituals, eating clean foods, etc.)<sup>2</sup>. The ceremonial law has been fulfilled by Jesus Christ (Matthew 5:17), has been cancelled (Colossians 2:14) and has been abrogated (Ephesians 2:15) since the first coming of Jesus Christ. Since the first coming of Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ is the only High Priest (Hebrews 4:15; Hebrews 7:11-28) as well as the only atonement sacrifice (Romans 3:24-25). If no Christian church brings animal sacrifices, why maintain the Old Testament priesthood?

Both Jesus Christ and the apostle Peter teach that the leadership structure in the New Testament is not “a hierarchical structure” (i.e. a standing triangle with the leaders ever higher at the top of the triangle), but should be “a servant structure” (i.e. an upside-down triangle with the true leaders at the bottom of the triangle). Jesus taught, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

Leadership in the Bible is always “servant leadership” and always “shared leadership” (Acts 14:23, Acts 20:17,28).

## 3. The argument for a pope.

The Episcopal Church of Rome argues that Christ gave to the apostle Peter *the highest position* in the Church, when he said, “I tell you that you are Peter (Greek: petros), and on this rock (Greek: petra) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of heaven: whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:18-19). The Episcopal Churches argue that there must be “a highest apostle or pope” of the Church *who represents Christ on earth*.

### Comment.

What Jesus Christ said about Peter *was true in Church History, but not true in Church Law*. Jesus Christ fulfilled his promise to Peter when he used Peter to plant the first historical church (congregation) among the Jews (Acts chapter 2), the first historical church (congregation) among the half-Jews (Samaritans)(Acts chapter 8) and the first historical church (congregation) among the non-Jews (the Gentiles)(Acts chapter 10-11).

But Peter never received a higher authority than the other apostles (compare Matthew 16:19 with Matthew 18:18 and John 20:22-23 and Galatians 2:6-9) and not even a higher authority than the other elders! The apostle Peter spoke about himself as “a fellow elder” alongside the elders of the congregations (1 Peter 5:1-2)! There is therefore no biblical ground for appointing “a bishop” or “a pope”.

Moreover, note: Jesus Christ claims that the Church belongs to him and that it is he who builds the Church: “I build my Church”. And the apostle Paul teaches that Jesus Christ (and not the bishop, pope or patriarch) is the Head of the Church (Ephesians 1:20-22)!

## 4. The argument for the apostolic succession.

The Episcopal Churches argue that the office of “the highest apostle” must be continued perpetually through a series of bishops, called “the Apostolic Succession”. They base the Apostolic Succession (and the authority to ordain priests by only a bishop) on Matthew 16:18-19.

### Comment.

In Matthew 16:18-19 and Matthew 18:18 Jesus Christ teaches about the authority of “his twelve apostles” and not about the authority of “bishops and priests”! Although the first elders (Greek: presbuteroi) for the first historical congregations (churches) were appointed by “the church planters”: the apostle Paul and his fellow workers, Barnabas (Acts 14:23), Timothy (1 Timothy 3:1-7; 1 Timothy 5:17-22) and Titus (Titus 1:5-9), the Bible clearly teaches that elders should be appointed by the congregations themselves (1 Timothy 3:1-7, 1 Timothy 5:17-22, Titus 1:5-9 and 1 Peter 5:1-4).

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Delta PLUS study 9, “The Law in the Bible”

In the very first congregation in Church History the ordinary believers (members of the congregation) were involved in the appointment of an apostle (Acts 1:15-26) and in the appointment of deacons (Acts 6:1-7). They had to appoint them on the basis of the biblical requirements (1 Timothy 3:1-7,14-15) and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28). There is therefore no biblical basis that only a bishop (or any other higher office) may appoint or ordain elders!

## B. THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP SYSTEM (STRUCTURE) IN CHURCH HISTORY

### 1. The episcopal view of the Church.

- There is but one Catholic (i.e. world-wide) Church. No single local church (= congregation) is independent or “one hundred percent church”. The world-wide Church is a *reflection of the World-wide Roman Empire*.
- In general the Episcopal Churches teach that salvation is only possible in *the only true church*, namely, their own church!
- The church must remain a *visible organisation* in the world.
- In the Episcopal Churches the office of bishop is emphasised as *the only leader* in the church.

### 2. The episcopal view of how Christ rules.

- Christ rules world-wide only through “the council of bishops” and locally only through “the local bishop”.
- In the case of the Roman Catholic Church, Christ rules through the bishop of Rome, called “the pope” and through “the council of bishops in co-operation with the pope”. The office of the pope is based on Matthew 16:18-19 and the justification for the council of bishops is based on the Jerusalem consultation in Acts chapter 15.
- Thus, the rule of Christ does not take place through the Bible, the Holy Spirit and the council of elders of the local congregation (chosen by the members of the congregation), but through the pope and the council of bishops. Only the pope may appoint a new bishop and only the council of bishops may appoint a new pope! In Church History bishops have drawn all power to themselves!

### 3. The episcopal view of church leadership.

- The council of bishops.

In the episcopal church leadership system “bishops” (plural) take the central position. Originally the view was that “the council of bishops” had the highest authority (power) in the Church. This council made all decisions about matters of faith, conduct, church law, church discipline, etc. But this changed in the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

- The monarchical episcopate – the pope.

Pope Innocent I (A.D. 401-417) as bishop of Rome arrogantly claimed for himself a higher authority than all the other bishops in the world! Thus the Roman Catholic Church became a *monarchical episcopate – a one-headed leadership of a college of bishops*, in which the highest authority (power) in the Church rests with the bishop (metropolitan) of Rome, called “the pope”.

The pope is regarded as “the representative of Christ on earth” and “the shepherd of the whole Church on earth”. Since the Vatican Council I in 1870 the bishop of Rome (the pope) is regarded as “the universal bishop of the Church”. That is why the Roman Catholic Church also teaches that there is no salvation possible outside the Roman Catholic Church!

- Bishopric, parish, clerics and laity.

“A bishopric” is an area of parishes (churches or congregations) ruled by the bishop. The bishop is the spiritual and church leader of “the parishes”, “the clerics” (i.e. the priests and deacons) and “the laity” (i.e. the ordinary believers or members) within his bishopric.

- Hierarchical structure.

The church leadership system is hierarchical. The bishop (Greek: episkopos) is the highest office and he is the supervisor of the priests (Greek: presbuteroi). The office of bishop is regarded as a divine right based on Matthew 16:18-19<sup>3</sup>.

- The authority of a bishop.

In principle the office of bishop includes all the offices of the church! He presides over all and rules all people and everything in his bishopric: doctrine, pastoral care, church discipline, appointment and ordination of all the offices and church law.

The bishop claims the following authority:

- He is the only legislator in his bishopric. All jurisdiction is entrusted only to the bishop.
- He appoints, ordains, changes or removes all the lower offices in the church.
- He maintains church doctrine.

<sup>3</sup> Note that Matthew 16:18-19 does not speak of “a bishop”, but of “an apostle” of Christ.

- He claims respect and obedience from all the clerics and laymen.

#### 4. The advantages of an episcopal church leadership system (structure).

- The visible unity of the visible church in the world.
- It is easy to enforce outward uniformity onto each congregation.
- It is easier to rule over all the congregations.

#### 5. The disadvantages of an episcopal church leadership system (structure).

- The episcopal view is not grounded on the Bible, but on Roman World Empire during the early Church History.
- The visible unity within and without the Roman Catholic Church does not really exist. The visible unity of the Christian Church is better grounded on “a mutual confession of faith”, the preaching and teaching of “the Bible” and the practice of “love”, rather than on one or another organisational system, structure or form.
- There exists a wide cliff between the clerics (the leadership by the episcopate) and the laity (the ordinary church members).
- The ordinary believers are kept immature. They are taught to obey and carry out the decisions of the clerics. The office of the ordinary believer (the priesthood of the believer) has no place!
- The Episcopal Church had become a hierarchy instead of a Christocracy! The power in the church had replaced the power of Christ. Roman Catholic teaching had replaced the teaching of the Bible. The council of bishops and especially the pope (when he speaks “ex cathedra”, that is, “from his holy seat”) determines the following:
  - The interpretation of the Bible that includes some apocrypha.
  - The confession of the Roman Catholic Church faith, which rests not only on the Bible, but on *the tradition* of the Roman Catholic Church.
  - Church law (i.e. structure and organisation).

Because the Roman Catholic Church let go of the Bible as the foundation of Christian doctrine and life, it teaches the following unbiblical doctrines and practices:

- the apostolic succession
- the pope as the highest authority in the Church
- the veneration of Mary
- the doctrine of transubstantiation during mass
- the infusion of grace at infant baptism
- good works as necessary for salvation
- multiple sacraments
- the celibate
- confession and purgatory.

## C. THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP SYSTEM (STRUCTURE) AND THE BIBLE

### 1. The argument for the office of the believer.

The Congregational Churches (denominations) teach that every believer has a priestly office, a prophetic office and a royal office (1 Peter 2:9-10). For example, the priestly office represents people with God through prayer. The prophetic office represents God with people through the preaching of the Word. And the royal office is to conquer sin, the evil world and the devil in dependence of God.

#### Comment.

It is correct: the Bible teaches the office of every believer (the priesthood of the believer).

- Every believer has a priestly task (1 Peter 2:4-5,9-10; 1 Peter 4:10).
- Every believer has a prophetic task (1 Peter 3:15-16).
- Every believer has a royal task (1 Peter 1:14-15; 1 Peter 4:3; 1 Peter 5:8).

### 2. The argument for independent churches (congregations).

The Congregational Churches teach that all congregations are “independent” (Acts 15:41; Acts 16:5; Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 7:17; 2 Corinthians 8:18-24; 2 Thessalonians 1:1,4; Revelation 1:12-13,20; Revelation 2:7,11,17,23,29; Revelation 3:6,13,22) and that these independent congregations are “sister churches” of one another (2 John 13). The contact and cooperation between these congregations take place via “conferences” or “meetings of representatives” for consultation (Acts 15), mutual help and support (2 Corinthians chapters 8-9).

#### Comment.

According to the Bible this is correct: the Bible teaches the independence of every local church. Every congregation functions as a body, with Jesus Christ as the Head. All the believers are members of this body and have a specific task (1 Corinthians 12:12-28).

### 3. The argument for not having official offices.

Some Congregational Churches teach that Christians should call no one “rabbi”, because only Christ is the Master. Christians should call no one “father”, because only God is the heavenly Father and Christians are one another’s brothers and sisters. And Christians should call no one “teacher”, because only Christ is the Teacher (Matthew 23:8-10). Therefore the Congregational Churches reject official church offices that represent the tasks of Jesus Christ within the congregation.

#### Comment.

According to the Bible this is not correct, because in Matthew 23 Jesus Christ was *not addressing Christians*, but the Jewish Teachers of the Law (the theologians) and the Jewish Pharisees, because they regarded themselves as the authoritative expositors of the Old Testament Scriptures (Matthew 23:2). Their interpretations and opinions about the Law were wrong (Matthew 15:1-20). They had appointed themselves as the spiritual leaders of the people, but in reality they were “blind leaders” (Matthew 23:16). Their eyes were still covered with a veil, so that in spite of their great knowledge of the Old Testament, they could not see the truth (2 Corinthians 3:14-15). They were “like unmarked graves (with unclean corpses), which men walk over without knowing it” (Luke 11:44). Therefore, all these teachers of the Old Testament had to make way to the Messiah-Teacher, Jesus Christ (Deuteronomy 18:15-19). And Jesus Christ sent his New Testament “teachers” (Matthew 23:34).

During his life on earth, Jesus Christ had personally chosen, called, equipped and appointed his twelve disciples to be his “apostles (sent ones)” for a special task or ministry: to be his eyewitnesses (Acts 1:8), to preach the good news to all creation (Mark 16:14-15), to make disciples of all the nations (Matthew 28:19), to record the New Testament Scriptures (John 14:26; 6:13-14) and to appoint the first elders of congregations (Acts 14:23).

During the beginning of the Church in Church History, the Holy Spirit appointed “the elders” to be “the overseers and shepherds” of the local congregation (Acts 20:28). The apostle Peter taught that the elders were “the overseers and shepherds” of the congregations, functioning under the leadership of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ (1 Peter 5:1-4). The apostle Paul speaks in the New Testament of “the office of teacher” (1 Timothy 5:17) and of “the spiritual gift of teacher” (Romans 12:7). There is therefore no biblical basis for rejecting the official church offices.

## D. THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP SYSTEM (STRUCTURE) IN CHURCH HISTORY

### 1. The congregational view of the Church.

The local church is a completely independent congregation (church) and “one hundred percent church”. The independent congregation (church) is *a reflection of independent man in the age of enlightenment and individualism*.

Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, people come to faith. The believers join together in a “congregation”, in which Jesus Christ himself is present (Matthew 18:20). They freely bind themselves to carry out the biblical ministry. The congregation must not become too big, because then the fellowship of believers would be threatened. Then it would be better to split the congregation into two independent congregations. The independent congregations may have a mutual agreement, but must remain free and independent from each other. In the congregational church leadership system or structure the emphasis is on “the office of the believer” or “the priesthood of every believer”, who together with other believers and their spiritual gifts form a “congregation” together.

### 2. The congregational view of how Christ rules.

Christ rules the congregation of believers directly through the Holy Spirit living in believers. He does not rule them through the traditional offices (like bishops, priests, pastors or ministers, elders and deacons) or through umbrella organisations (like councils, synods, classes, conferences, etc.). The Holy Spirit has been poured out on the Church (Acts chapter 2) and lives in the midst of the congregation (Matthew 18:20).

### 3. The congregational view of church leadership.

Every “congregation” (fellowship of believers) is authorised to rule itself and draw up its own church law (consisting of statutes and regulations). The congregational church leadership system or structure does not begin at the top (with the office of the apostle Peter), but at the bottom (with the Body, the congregation of believers).

The congregational church leadership system has no umbrella organisation (e.g. a council or synod) that makes decisions and rules to which all the congregations are bound. However, there are “conferences” or “meetings of representatives” for consultation, mutual help and support.

“The general assembly” of the believers of the local congregation has the highest authority. Congregational Churches may have “offices”, but these offices do not derive their authority from Christ (who calls them), but from the general assembly of the congregation (that has chosen them in a democratic way). The offices are responsible and accountable only to the general assembly of the congregation. This general assembly of the congregation has the authority to dismiss the offices. Sometimes the Congregational Churches have two offices, “the pastor” and “deacons”, or even more offices, like shepherd, teacher, elder, deacon, administrator and helper.

### 4. The advantages of the congregational church leadership system (structure).

- There is no hierarchy of offices and also no umbrella organisation that exercises authority over the believers. Every congregation is completely independent.
- Every congregation may adapt itself to the local situation and demands.
- The priesthood of believers is emphasised. Every believer has a task and a spiritual gift to execute his task. Every believer is important and is involved in the activities of the congregation.
- The congregation remains small and the fellowship remains intimate and warm. Everyone knows everyone personally.
- The decision making process is effective, because it is never blocked by a higher office or a higher umbrella organisation.
- All the time new “congregations” are founded in the midst of communities and close to the places where people live. The meeting places of the congregations are very accessible. Many congregations are “house fellowships” or “house churches”.

### 5. The disadvantages of the congregational church leadership system (structure).

- The congregational view of church leadership is not based on the Bible, but rather on the age of enlightenment and individualism.
- A large group of believers in the congregation are often still immature, have little discernment and can slip into false teaching, sectarian parties and problems similar to those mentioned in the first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 1 Corinthians 3:1-4). “The believer” takes too much centre stage within the congregational church system (cf. Romans 11:36).

- The Christian Church (congregation) is not a democracy, but a Christocracy! Decisions that are made on the basis of democratic voting can still be wrong and depart from the teachings on the Bible. The democratic majority of believers are not necessarily always “right” (Acts 5:17-42).
- The Congregational Churches in Church History has spawned many different congregations (independent denominations) and each denomination determined its own direction (teachings and leadership system).
- The Congregational Churches generally do not have very clear statements of faith or a church order or church formularies to which the offices and members are bound.
- The congregational church leadership system does not have official offices that are appointed by Jesus Christ to keep the congregation to her biblical calling, to build and lead the congregation and, if necessary, correct the congregation.

## E. THE SYNODAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP SYSTEM (STRUCTURE) AND THE BIBLE

### 1. The argument for having an umbrella church leadership structure above the body of elders.

The Synodal Churches remain on the whole state-churches or national people's churches. They teach that just as the government of a country needs overarching political- and social structures in order to govern the country, likewise a state church, a national church, an ethnic church or a denomination needs an "overarching leadership system or structure" (an umbrella organisation) to keep the local congregations (churches) together and to lead them on the national level. Often the Jerusalem Consultation in Acts chapter 15 is used as a proof that the Church had an umbrella organisation above the councils of elders of the local congregations.

#### Comment.

##### ▪ The Jerusalem Consultation.

The argument that the Jerusalem Consultation in Acts chapter 15 was an umbrella organisation above the councils of elders of the local churches is untenable! The Jerusalem Consultation was never a council or synod in which all the local churches were represented! It was only a meeting between the representatives (apostles and elders) of two local churches (Antioch in Syria and Jerusalem in Judea) in order to consult on the issue of circumcision. The church system or structure was not discussed at all, but only the relationship of the Jewish ceremonial law to the salvation in Jesus Christ.

Because false teachers coming from the congregation in Jerusalem had spread their false teaching to other congregations, the Jerusalem Consultation decided to make their decision known to other congregations (Acts 16:4). The word "decisions"<sup>4</sup> in Acts 16:4 is a legal term used in the court with the meaning: "non-enforceable decisions" or "decisions in the sense of recommendations"<sup>5</sup>.

##### ▪ The councils of bishops of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Churches of the Reformation (the Protestants) copied the Roman Catholic Church "councils of bishops" and called this umbrella organisation "a synod" (literally: "a being together on the road", thus "a gathering" or "meeting").

- But while the Roman Catholic Church set their umbrella organisation (the Council of bishops) over all their churches *in the world*
- the Protestant state churches or national people's churches in some countries set their umbrella organisation (the synod) over all local churches *in a particular country*
- the denominations set their umbrella organisation (the General Conference) over *all congregations of a particular denomination* (with its particular doctrines and behaviour)
- and the ethnic churches set their umbrella organisation (e.g. Board of directors or Board of deacons) over all congregations *of a particular ethnic group*.

##### ▪ The overarching organisations of the Protestant Churches.

Originally the overarching church system (structure) of *the state church* came into being when the (political) head of the state regarded himself to be the (spiritual) head of the church as well. Likewise certain *church denominations with specific doctrines* were formed and kept together by their umbrella leadership structure. And ethnic groups formed *ethnic denominations with a specific language and culture* that are kept together by their umbrella leadership structure.

But according to the Bible the political head of state, or the leader of a particular denomination, or the leader of a particular ethnic group can never become the leader of the Church of Christ, because that position belongs only to Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:20-23)!

##### ▪ Continued split offs.

In the past few hundred years the political state churches and denominations with particular teachings and ethnic people's churches have encountered several separations or split offs from one another so that more and more denominations have arisen together with their umbrella leadership systems or structures.

- There are now several synodal types of churches that originally belonged to one state church.
- There are an increasing number of denominations with sometimes widely different teachings and practices.
- There are more and more ethnic churches who try to maintain their ethnic cultures (identity).

On the whole, the church leadership systems or structures have remained the "synodal" type, that is, each denomination has some kind of hierarchical system or structure with an umbrella organisation at the top above the local congregations. The traditional "control from the top" has been maintained without these churches making much effort

<sup>4</sup> Greek: dogmata kekrimena

<sup>5</sup> G. Vos

to test their traditional church system or structure with the clear teachings of the Bible (cf. Matthew 15:1-20; Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

## 2. The argument for having a pastor, minister or leader.

The synodal type of churches usually has one fulltime pastor, minister or leader. Most often he is accorded the highest position in the local congregation. He is regarded as “the primus inter pares”, which means, “the first among equals”. He most often claims to be the leader of the whole congregation. In order to motivate having only one pastor, minister or leader, churches often quote the example of Timothy in the congregation of Ephesus and the example of Titus in the congregations on Crete.

They also divide the tasks which God had assigned to the elders into:

- “an apostolic task” (!)<sup>6</sup> for the pastor, minister or leader
- and “a pastoral and administrative task” for the remaining elders.

They often use 1 Timothy 5:17 to “prove” this division of tasks.

### Comment.

- The church tradition within the Episcopal Churches is maintained within the Churches of the Reformation.

The hierarchical church leadership system or structure of the Episcopal Churches (consisting of the bishop at the top, then the priests and finally the deacons) has since the Reformation in 1517 been maintained in the hierarchical church leadership system or structure of the Churches of the reformation (consisting of one pastor, minister or leader at the top, then the elders and finally the deacons).

*The traditional domination of the bishop within the Episcopal Churches and of the pastor, minister or leader within the Protestant Churches have been maintained without these churches making much effort to test their tradition with the clear teachings of the Bible (Matthew 15:1-20; Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4). The Bible teaches no “apostolic succession” and also “no new position like that of a bishop” within the Episcopal Churches or “a new position like that of a pastor, minister or leader” within the Protestant Churches!*

- The travelling fellow workers of the apostle Paul and the local council of elders. Timothy and Titus were much more than modern fulltime “pastors, ministers or leaders” of a local congregation. They travelled together with the apostle Paul as “church planters” and “church builders” and were much more “missionaries” and “members of a team of trainers and coaches” who work in several local churches than “modern pastors, ministers or leaders” who work in one local church!

During the first imprisonment of the apostle Paul in Rome (60-61 A.D.) Timothy was close to Paul (Colossians 1:1; Philemon 1:1; Philippians 1:1). From his imprisonment Paul wrote that he would send Timothy to Philippi (Philippians 2:19-24). After his release from prison, Paul sent Timothy to Philippi and travelled himself to Crete, where he left Titus to build up the local congregations on Crete (Acts 2:11; Titus 1:5). Thereafter Paul travelled to Colosse to meet Philemon (Philemon 22). Finally Paul travelled to Ephesus, where he met Timothy and received news from Philippi. Paul requested Timothy to remain in Ephesus while he himself travelled to Philippi and Macedonia (Philippians 2:24; 1 Timothy 1:3).

In 62-63 A.D. Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy and his letter to Titus from Macedonia (Philippi?). He hoped to return to Ephesus soon, but expected a delay (1 Timothy 3:14-15). He requested Timothy to meet him in Nicopolis (Titus 3:12), possibly to accompany him in his trip to Spain (Romans 15:24).

Thus, Timothy and Titus worked together with Paul to build up newly planted and established congregations in sound doctrine and life (1 Timothy 1:3; Titus 2:1). They also established a biblical church leadership system consisting of a “board of elders” and sometimes some deacons as assistants (1 Timothy 3:1-15; Titus 1:5-9). Timothy and Titus were not educated at a Theological Seminary or a Bible School, but had received their “on the job training” from the apostle Paul! Timothy and Titus functioned as one of the elders in the council of elders (just as the apostle Peter functioned as “an elder” in 1 Peter 5:1-4 and the apostle John called himself “the elder” in 2 and 3 John). They preached and taught (1 Timothy 5:17) and set a personal example (1 Timothy 4:12-16; Titus 2:7-8).

Nowhere in the Bible is there a teaching that a local congregation should have “a pastor”, “a minister” or “a leader”, that is, a person that has a position above the other elders, that often draws all the power in the congregation to himself, or that desires to lord it over all the other believers!

On the contrary, Jesus Christ and the apostles clearly teach that the leaders must be the greatest servants in the congregation (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4)! Against having one pastor, minister or leader at the top of the congregation, the Bible teaches clearly that every congregation should eventually have a council of elders who share the leadership responsibility in the local congregation (Acts 20:17,28; 1 Timothy 3:1-15; 1 Timothy 4:14; 1 Timothy 5:17-22; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

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<sup>6</sup> A kind of “apostolic succession” within the Protestant Church.

- The custom to differentiate the task of the pastor, minister or leader from the task of the rest of the elders.

Splitting up the task of the elders into “an apostolic task for the pastor, minister or leader” and “a pastoral and administrative task for the rest of the elders” is inadmissible! *This tradition within the Protestant Churches is still a residue from the time before the Reformation, where the bishop claimed to be the successor of the apostles of Christ (in the so-called “Apostolic Succession”).*

A modern pastor, minister or leader is in the Bible nothing more and nothing less than an ordinary “elder” (1 Timothy 5:17)! All elders share in the preaching, teaching, pastoral and administrative functions of the council of elders and no task may be reserved for the pastor, minister or leader alone!

- (1) All elders are “shepherds” (Latin: “pastors”) and “overseers” (Greek: “bishops”) of the congregation (Acts 20:17,28; 1 Peter 5:2).
- (2) All the elders are “directors” (Greek: pro-histamenos, pro-estòtes) or “managers” (Greek: oikonomos) of the activities and possessions of the congregation (1 Timothy 3:5; 1 Timothy 5:17a; Titus 1:7).
- (3) All the elders are “teachers” (Greek: didaktikos) of God’s Word (the Bible)(1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9), even if there are some elders who do this more often than the others (1 Timothy 5:17).
- (4) All the elders execute their responsible tasks as “servants” (Greek: diakonos) of God and of the members of the congregation (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

All the elders are called, appointed and ordained (cf. 1 Timothy 4:14) to take care of all the tasks that need to be done in the congregation, including: preaching the Word of God during the official services, teaching the Bible with authority, pronouncing a blessing, baptising people, leading during the Lord’s Supper, appointing people to offices in the congregation (with prayer and the laying on of hands), to discipline members who sin (Matthew 18:15-17) and to lead at marriages and funerals.

### 3. The argument for having several new offices.

The Synodal Churches think that they may appoint more offices and different kind of offices on the level of the local church on the basis of Acts 6:1-7. For example, they appoint “a churchwarden”, “an administrator” and “a treasurer”. etc.). They argue that if a person may be appointed to serve in the distribution of food to the poor, they may also appoint other people to perform other kinds of services.

However, all such people should rather be regarded as “deacons” with a variety of different tasks.

The Synodal Churches also think that they may appoint representative offices on the national level of the church on the basis of Acts 15:1-3. For example, they appoint “a chairman” and “a secretary” for the synod. They argue, that if a representative was sent to the Jerusalem Consultation, then representatives may also be sent to overarching leadership structures (umbrella organisations) like “classes” and “synods”.

#### Comment.

On the basis of Acts 6:1-7 a congregation may appoint a deacon to perform a specific task of service within the local congregation (e.g. a church warden). And on the basis of 1 Timothy 3:5 and Titus 1:7 a congregation may appoint an elder to perform a specific task of leadership within the local congregation (e.g. a minister). But *because there is in the Bible no ground for any overarching leadership structure (or umbrella organisation) that has authority over the local congregations. “representatives” may only be appointed to meetings of several congregations with authority to consult and not with authority to make binding decisions over other local congregations!*

## F. THE SYNODAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP SYSTEM (STRUCTURE) IN CHURCH HISTORY

### 1. The synodal view of the Church.

Every local congregation is a manifestation of the Body of Christ. The priesthood of the believer and the offices appointed by Christ (the elders) receive an important place. However according to the synodal view also the representative offices appointed by the local congregations to the overarching structures (or umbrella organisations like the classes and synods) receive an important place.

The state church or national church is *a reflection of the national state or national people* (e.g. *the Russian Orthodox Church, the German Lutheran Church, the Dutch Reformed Church or the Chinese Three Selves Patriotic Church*). Also *the various denominations* (e.g. the Lutherans, the Calvinists, the Evangelicals, the Pentecostals, etc.) reflect traditional doctrinal differences.

### 2. The synodal view of how Christ rules.

Christ rules through the Holy Spirit, the Bible and the appointed offices (not only the elders, but also the churchwardens and administrators and representatives to overarching leadership structures like the classes, the provincial synods and

the national synod). But because the Synodal Church in essence remains a *state* church, a *national* church, an *ethnic* church or a *denomination* within a country, it generally has no *world-wide* synod!

Some ethnic churches have an umbrella leadership structure that does not have any representatives. They do not even have statutes or regulations. All the authority in the church rests with “the founder of the church”, or with “a board of directors” (of the foundation) or with “the team of the pastor”. Such an umbrella organisation is instituted without any biblical warrant by the founder, the board or the pastor *to control* all the daughter congregations! The umbrella organisation is *a reflection of the power structures in politics*.

### 3. The synodal view of church leadership.

- The synodal view on offices.

While the episcopal church leadership system (structure) emphasises “the office” (the bishop) and the congregational church leadership system (structure) emphasises “the congregation”, the synodal church leadership system (structure) takes a middle position. The synodal system opposes the monarchical (one-headed) system of the hierarchical Episcopal Churches where all people and every activity in the church is ruled and controlled by one single office, “the bishop” (e.g. the Roman Catholic Church in Church History). The synodal system also opposes the congregational system where no single office takes the leadership responsibility, so that the congregation easily falls prey to fanaticism and zealotry (e.g. the Anabaptists in Church History).

When one has been appointed to an office in the Synodal Churches, one is “one hundred percent bearer of an office”. The bearer of the office stands in service of Jesus Christ in order to represent the task, authority and rule of Jesus Christ as shepherd, manager, preacher and servant within the local congregation and, if necessary, over against the congregation! This is biblical.

However, the synodal view also regards the appointed representatives to the umbrella church leadership organisations (the classes and synods) to be bearers of an office who stands in service of Jesus Christ in order to represent the task, authority and rule of Jesus Christ *as overseer (bishop) within the state church, the ethnic church or the denomination!* This is not biblical!

- The synodal view on the appointment of offices.

The synodal church leadership system (structure) also begins at the bottom with the local congregation and moves from the bottom up. The members of the local congregation appoint their own bearers of offices (the elders and, if necessary, the deacons) in the local church. The offices are not appointed outside the local congregation and subsequently enforced on the local congregation by the overarching leadership structure (as is done by the bishop in the Episcopal Churches). Any member of the local congregation who qualifies to become a bearer of an office may be elected by the members of the local congregation. The synodal system or structure does not know the deep divide between “the clerics” (i.e. the bearers of offices) and “the laymen” (i.e. the ordinary members of the congregation) within the Episcopal Churches. The offices of elder and deacon are also not life-long as in the Episcopal Churches. They are chosen and appointed for a specific term of office. Thereafter they again take their place as an ordinary member within the congregation.

However, the election and appointment of a pastor, minister or leader is often the privilege of only the council of elders and must be ratified by the general assembly of the local congregation and the overarching church leadership organisation (the classis).

- The synodal view on the church council.

The characteristic of the synodal church leadership system (structure) is that the offices exercise their office and authority:

- together on the local level in “the church council”<sup>7</sup> and
- also together on the national level in the overarching church leadership organisation (the umbrella organisation) like “a classis” or “a synod”.

Thus, the denominations that have an overarching leadership system (structure) in essence remain:

- a state church maintaining the nationalism of the members
- or a denomination that maintains particular doctrines and practices
- or a people’s church or ethnic church that maintains the culture (including language, traditional customs, values and norms) of a particular nation or ethnic group.

In a synodal or overarching leadership system (structure) the church council has responsibility and *authority only on the local church level*.

The church council consists of the most mature, spiritual and experienced people in the local congregation and stand in the service of Christ with the responsibility to see to it that the will and cause of Christ is carried out on the local church level. The members of the church council have been called and appointed to carry out the pastoral, diaconal and

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<sup>7</sup> Not called “the council of elders”, because “the church council” not only consists of elders, but also of deacons, the church warden, the administrator, the secretary, etc.

apostolic tasks of Christ in the local church. The church council must lead the whole congregation in the way of Christ. The church council walks ahead in the front and leads the local church in an effective manner in these tasks.

- The synodal view on the pastor or leader.

Most congregations within the synodal system (structure) have “a pastor”, “a minister” or “a leader” who in general has received a theological education and has been approved by the overarching leadership structure (classis and synod).

The pastor, minister or leader *often* claims some or all the following rights:

- He is the leader of the whole congregation, chairman of the church council and of all the important committees.
- All the elders, deacons and members of the congregation must subject themselves to his leadership, respect him and obey him.
- He alone may administer baptism, the Lord’s Supper and pronounce the blessing.
- He alone has authority to ordain the bearers of offices (the elders and deacons).
- He alone may conduct marriage and funeral services.
- He alone may catechise the new members.
- He alone may give discipleship training to the believers.
- He must be one of the representatives to all overarching leadership meetings (classis and synod).

- The synodal view on overarching leadership meetings.

The synod is the overarching leadership organisation consisting of all the representatives of local congregations in a state, nation, denomination or ethnic group. In a synodal system the synod bears the *responsibility on the national (!) level*.

The meetings of the umbrella organisations (classes and synods) are also called “superior meetings”. It is said that originally the superior meetings were intended for consultation only, but gradually they became meetings that set themselves above the local congregations and made decisions that were enforced onto the local congregations. *The same kind of development took place in the Early Church in the second century A.D. The local churches lost their independence and the highest authority came to rest with the umbrella organisation!*<sup>8</sup> The local congregations with their church councils were thus *no longer independent!* And the final authority came to rest with *the overarching leadership organization (the national synod)!*

The local congregations with their church councils *are never independent!* With these churches *the final authority then rests with overarching organisation (the national synod)!*

In the overarching leadership meetings the delegates or representatives of the local congregations make decisions about things which *cannot* be decided on the local level, or rather, may not (!) be decided on the local level.

The overarching leadership meetings have claimed for themselves the following responsibilities:

- Determining a statement of faith for all the congregations of the denomination (e.g. their confessions of faith).
- Determining the same church order for all the congregations (usually never inter-cultural).
- Overseeing all the office bearers (via classes, consultants and visitations).
- Equipping the members of the congregations (organising training courses on a national scale).
- Equipping the pastors, ministers or leaders and teachers of the congregations (in theological institutes).
- Handling grievances and conflicts between congregations or office bearers and matters of discipline of office bearers.
- Planning mutual ministries as evangelism, missions and social actions within and without the country.
- Liaison between their own Church and the government and other Christian Churches.
- Organising fellowship with other Christian Churches and possible unification with one another.

#### 4. The advantages of the synodal church leadership system (structure).

- The synodal system of church organisation preserves the unity within the state church, national church, ethnic church or denomination.

However, Church History has shown how different trends within a state church, national church, ethnic church or denomination (e.g. the conservatives, the evangelicals, the zealots and the false teachers) have brought havoc within the church.

- The following advantages are really advantages of the presbyterian church leadership system (structure), but they are also advantages within the synodal church leadership system (structure):
  - The church council watches over the sound doctrine in the congregation.

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<sup>8</sup> Sociology of Christian churches during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the USA has proved that:

(1) churches generally began with “a charismatic leader preaching the Word”.

(2) When the number of people in the congregation became large, the emphasis in the congregation shifted from the Word to “activities” (that promote the Word).

(3) After some time the emphasis shifts from activities to “organisation” (of these activities).

(4) Then the emphasis shifts from organisation to “positions of leadership” (that controls the organisation).

(5) Finally, the emphasis shifts from position of leadership in the local congregation to “positions of leadership on the national or world-wide level”.

- The church council can and must take a stand against the majority within the congregation in all issues that depart from Christ and his teachings in the Bible! The members of the church council can only do this on the ground that they have been called by Christ, appointed by the congregation *and on the basis of the correct interpretation of the Bible!*
- The church council maintains relationships of love and order within the congregation. The church council takes a stand against any office bearer or member who lords it over others.
- Although ordinary church members may reprimand and discipline one another, the difficult cases ought to be handled by the church council.

## 5. The disadvantages of the synodal church leadership system (structure).

- The synodal church leadership system or structure is not based on the Bible.

The synodal or overarching church leadership system (structure) is only partially based on the Bible. It is also based on the political state, the ethnic nation or the doctrinal denomination.

- Ineffective management.

The overarching church leadership meetings *have reserved the following decisions for themselves:*

- decisions with regard to the structure of the church (the overarching leadership meetings or umbrella organisation)
- decisions with regard to the statements of faith of the church (issues like the sacraments)
- decisions with regard to church order (issues like finances, ownership of church buildings, fulltime office bearers, education of pastors and the exercise of church discipline against pastors that step out of line).

In order to change these issues is almost impossible, because the overarching meetings are attended by too many representatives of local churches, have completely different local situations and take far too much time to resolve issues and make united decisions. The overarching leadership structures cannot and do not function effectively. And when these superior meetings make decisions by democratic voting, there are always “a majority of winners” and “a minority of losers” who will remain unsatisfied, bitter and will eventually secede from the denomination! Some issues have already been debated for more than 20 years without reaching a satisfactory result!

Members of the congregations develop an attitude of disregard of official decisions made by the overarching leadership meetings (e.g. local congregations change their view and practice of the sacraments without permission from the overarching leadership meeting, they invite speakers that have not been approved by the overarching leadership or use alternative liturgies within their services).

- The enforcement of unbiblical decisions onto the local congregations.

The overarching leadership systems (structures) in the Protestant Churches in Church History have behaved like the councils in the Roman Catholic Church in the past and have made decisions to which all the local congregations were bound.

Examples of decisions made by the overarching leadership systems (structures):

- The pastor or leader of the local congregation is regarded as “the first among equals” in the church council. Thus, the pastor or leader becomes a kind of “bishop” (i.e. a successor of the apostles of Christ) due to his theological training and ordination by the offices of the overarching organisation (classis). He is given a position and authority above the other elders in the church council!
- The statements of faith in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands are interspersed with arguments against the Roman Catholic Church. But the truth is not always edifying (Ephesians 4:29)!
- A state church or national people’s church was established of which the head of state in the past regarded himself as the highest authority in the church.
- The tasks of the elders were divided between the pastor and the other elders without biblical warrant. The pastor received the apostolic task: preaching, teaching, leading the sacraments, ordaining the offices, chairing the meetings, etc.). The other elders received the pastoral and management tasks, which are often delegated to the deacons.
- New offices were added to the church without biblical warrant, like the churchwarden who takes care of the church building in name of the state. And representatives or delegates were appointed to the superior meetings of the church.

Note some decisions made by synods in the past.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Note some decisions made by synods in the past:

- “Liberation theology” was adopted in some churches without biblical warrant.
- “Apartheid” or the separation of races within the meetings of the Church in South Africa was adopted without biblical warrant.
- The abolition of the infallibility and authority of the Bible by the synod of one of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in 1974. The document of that synod: “God with us” (1980-11-04) removed the belief in the Bible as God’s inspired Word and as the final authority for Christian doctrine and life.
- Women were admitted to the office of elder (and pastor) in some churches without biblical warrant under pressure of the feminist movement.
- Homosexuals were officially married in some churches without biblical warrant.
- Missionary work and disciple making ministry has been blocked in some churches without biblical warrant.
- Independent “house fellowships” or “house churches” may only be conducted when they function under the control of certain denominations.

- The maintenance of unbiblical teachings and practices within congregations.

The different trends within the synodal type of churches (e.g. the conservatives, the evangelicals, the progressives, the alarmed, the zealots, the fanatics and the false teachers) all bring new teachings with them. These teachings are condoned and introduce more confusion, disunity, false teachings and wrong practices into the congregations. Thus, the organisational unity is maintained by the overarching church leadership system (structure) at the great cost of polluting the purity of the Christian message and Christian behaviour. Such organisational unity is no longer visible anywhere in the world!

Certain formulations of the Christian Faith are no longer biblically justified and must be changed. They may not be maintained on the basis of certain traditions or historical meetings, but must be based only on the Bible correctly interpreted.

Note some examples of questionable doctrines that are maintained by the overarching leadership systems (structures) of denominations.<sup>10</sup>

Note other necessary formulations of the Christian Faith are completely absent.<sup>11</sup>

Note some matters that are very important today and are not clearly stated.<sup>12</sup>

Note certain church order regulations that need to be changed.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Note some examples of questionable doctrines that are maintained by the overarching leadership systems or structures of denominations:

- The article of faith that maintains two phases in the second coming of Christ: the rapture of the Church and the manifestation of Christ
- The article of faith that maintains that the rapture of the Church would be followed by the Great Tribulation and the manifestation of Christ would be followed by a literal thousand year kingdom of peace based in Israel.
- The necessity to be baptised by immersion only.
- The necessity to be baptised with water in order to receive the Holy Spirit.

<sup>11</sup> Examples of doctrines that need to be stated and taught:

- Salvation by grace and justification by faith only.
- Justification and sanctification are inseparable.
- Believers no longer live under the law as God's righteous requirement for justification, but live under God's grace in which Christ is the believer's righteousness, sanctification and salvation (1 Corinthians 1:30).
- Believers no longer live under the ceremonial law (the shadows), but under the fulfilment of the ceremonial law (the realities).
- The Person, functions, fruit and gifts of the Holy Spirit.
- The Kingdom of God which is a present reality and much greater than the Church.
- The spiritual unity of the Church in the whole world.
- The one and only second coming of Christ.

<sup>12</sup> Some matters that are very important today and are not clearly stated:

- The incalculable value of the unborn child (a statement against abortion).
- The Christian marriage (a statement with respect to homosexual behaviour).
- The significance and value of suffering (e.g. in the persecution of Christians, but also against euthanasia).
- The necessity of justice and righteousness (a statement with respect to corruption in society, in justice system, in penal law, in rehabilitation of transgressors).
- The cultural commission of the Church (a statement with respect to ecology and caring for God's creation).
- Man-women relationships before and after marriage and sexuality (a statement with respect to the Christian view of marriage and sexuality).

<sup>13</sup> Note certain church order regulations that need to be changed:

- The relationship of the synod of the state church to the political authorities of the state.
- Church councils that still consist of only deacons, or with a church warden, board members, administrators and financial directors.
- Churchwardens that manage the church buildings on behalf of the state.
- Statutes in which board members of a Foundation have authority over the local church, even if that local church has a council of elders.
- Elders that are chosen on the basis of tradition, without reference to the biblical requirements for elders.
- Deacons that make decisions in the place of elders.

## G. THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH LEADERSHIP SYSTEM (STRUCTURE) AND THE BIBLE

### 1. The argument for the office of the believer.

The Presbyterian Churches teach that every believer has a priestly office, a prophetic office and a royal office (1 Peter 2:9-10). For example, the priestly office represents people with God through prayer. The prophetic office represents God with people through the preaching of the Word. And the royal office in dependence of God conquers sin, the world and the devil.

#### Comment.

The Bible teaches clearly the office of every believer.

- Every believer has a priestly task (1 Peter 2:4-5,9-10; 1 Peter 4:10).
- Every believer has a prophetic task (1 Peter 3:15-16).
- Every believer has a royal task (1 Peter 1:14-15; 1 Peter 4:3; 1 Peter 5:8).

### 2. The argument for independent churches (congregations).

#### (1) The word "church"

The word "church" in English has been derived from the Greek word "*kuriakon doma*", which means "the house of the Lord". The word "church" in the original Greek language of the New Testament is "ekklèsia" and is derived from the Greek verb "to call out" (of the world in order to belong to Christ). The word "ekklèsia" has several different meanings:

- Ekklèsia in the sense of "a gathering" or "meeting" of people.
  - Ekklèsia means *a gathering of the people*, a regular political meeting or political body (Acts 19:39).
  - Ekklèsia means *a gathering of people* (Acts 19:32,41).
  - Ekklèsia means *the congregation of Israel* (!), especially for religious purposes (Judges 20:2; Acts 7:38).
- Ekklèsia in the sense of "a gathering" or "meeting" of Christians.
  - Ekklèsia means "the congregation" consisting of Christians. Only the context can tell which aspect of the congregation is intended.
  - Ekklèsia can mean: a "gathering" or "meeting" (1 Corinthians 11:18; 1 Corinthians 14:19; 3 John 6).
- Ekklèsia in the sense of "the Church as the total of all the Christians living in a particular area".
  - Ekklèsia in the singular (Matthew 18:17; Acts 5:11; Acts 8:3; 1 Corinthians 4:17; Philippians 4:15; possibly 1 Timothy 5:16).
  - Ekklèsia in known places: Jerusalem (Acts 8:1; Acts 11:22); Antioch (Acts 11:26; Acts 13:1); Cenchrea (Romans 16:1); Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:2); Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 1:1); Ephesus (Revelation 2:1), etc.
  - Ekklèsia in the plural (Acts 15:41; Acts 16:5; Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 7:17; 2 Corinthians 8:18-24; 2 Thessalonians 1:4).
  - The churches in known places: Judea (Galatians 1:22; 1 Thessalonians 2:14); Galilee and Samaria (Acts 9:31), Galatia (1 Corinthians 16:1), Asia (1 Corinthians 16:19; Revelation 1:4); Macedonia (2 Corinthians 8:1).
  - "In each church" (Acts 14:23).

These churches were all independent congregations (churches), without any umbrella leadership structures above them!

- Ekklèsia in the sense of "a house church", Christians who meet together in a house.
  - A congregation meeting in the house of Priscilla and Aquila in Rome (Romans 16:5) and in Ephesus (1 Corinthians 16:19).
  - A congregation meeting in the house of Nympha (Colossians 4:15).
  - A congregation meeting in the house of Filemon (Filemon 1:1-2).

These churches were all independent congregations (churches), without any umbrella leadership structures lording it over them!

- Ekklèsia in the sense of "the universal or world-wide Church" of Christ.

This is the Church to which all Christians in the world belong. It is "the one world-wide Church" of the Apostolic Confession of faith (Matthew 16:18; Acts 9:31; 1 Corinthians 6:4; 1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 1:22; Ephesians 3:10,21; Ephesians 5:23-32; Philippians 3:6; Colossians 1:18,24; and possibly 1 Timothy 5:16).

Nowhere in the Bible is the world-wide Church one human organisation that rules over all the local congregations (churches) in the world.

- Ekklesia in the sense of “a local or world-wide church” sometimes has specific characteristics.

It gives the Greek word “ekklēsia” a specific Christian colour and thus a special meaning:

- “The Church of God” (1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Corinthians 10:32; etc.).
- “All the churches of Christ” (Romans 16:16).
- “The church in Thessalonica that belongs to God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 1:1).
- “In all churches (consisting of) the saints (the sanctified ones)” (1 Corinthians 14:33).
- “All the churches of Christ coming out of the Gentiles” (Romans 16:3,16).

(2) The word “church” in the Old Testament and in the New Testament:

**Believers from the Jews and non-Jews in the New Testament are called by exactly the same names as the believers from the Jews and non-Jews in the Old Testament!**

- God’s firstborn son (Exodus 4:22; Jeremiah 31:9; Hebrews 12:23)
  - God’s (covenant) people (Leviticus 26:12; 2 Corinthians 6:16)
  - God’s sons and daughters (Isaiah 43:6-7; 2 Corinthians 6:18)
  - One Kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6; Revelation 1:6)
  - A holy nation (Exodus 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9)
  - God’s chosen people (Deuteronomy 7:6; 1 Peter 2:9)
  - Jews (Zechariah 8:22-23; Romans 2:28-29)
  - Zion (Isaiah 51:16; Isaiah 52:7; Hebrews 12:22-24)
  - The twelve tribes (Revelation 21:12; James 1:1)
  - Israel (1 Samuel 7:23; Galatians 6:14-16)
  - Church. God’s Old Testament people were called “Church” (Hebrew: qahal; Greek: ekklesia) (Judges 20:2; Psalm 22:22; Psalm 107:32; 2 Chronicles 29:28). God called his Old Testament people or Church together through the proclamation of “the gospel” during the Old Testament period (Romans 10:18-21; Galatians 3:8; Hebrews 4:1-3). God’s Old Testament people (Israel) was not terminated or replaced (by the Church), but was continued and extended in the New Testament to include believers from the Gentile nations and is also called God’s people or “Church” (Greek: ekklesia)(Matthew 16:18). God also called his New Testament people or Church together through the proclamation of “the gospel” during the New Testament period (Acts 13:44-49; cf. Romans 3:21-22).
  - Jerusalem. “The city of God” or “the Heavenly Jerusalem” (Galatians 4:26) will become “the New Jerusalem” at the second coming of Christ (Hebrews 11:10-16; Hebrews 12:22-24; Hebrews 13:14). It will consist of believers from the Old Testament period and believers from the New Testament period (Revelation 21:9-14).
- The Church as “lamp stand”.
    - During the Old Testament period there was only one visible lamp stand with seven arms in the temple (Exodus 25:31-40). It symbolised the organic unity of God’s Old Testament Church-State, Israel.
    - During the New Testament period there are seven visible lamp stands with each one lamp standing in a circle around Christ (Revelation 1:12-13). This symbolised the organic unity of God’s New Testament Church consisting of the full number of congregations (churches) in the world and in history (Revelation 2:7). Thus, during the New Testament period the Christian churches in the world do not find their unity in an outward and visible organisation or structure (as the seven-armed lamp stand), but have a visible spiritual unity with one another through Jesus Christ who is present and active in their midst through the Holy Spirit.
  - The Church as “Body”.
    - The picture of the world-wide Church as “the Body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12) and all Christians as “members of that Body” shows that all Christian congregations in the world find their spiritual unity in their Head, Jesus Christ. All members of the body are ruled and controlled by the head. All Christians and Christian Churches are governed and controlled through their Head, Jesus Christ (and not through one or another overarching human structure or human umbrella organisation, like a council or synod). One member of the Body may never lord it over another member of the Body (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4).
    - Also the local church functions like a body with many different kinds of members (1 Corinthians 12:27).

(3) The Church and denominations.

Nowhere in the Bible is there any mention or justification for the existence of “a denomination”. There were some sinful factions within some local churches, but these received no approval from Christ or his apostles (John 17:21; 1 Corinthians 3:1-4). **There were simply no denominations in the New Testament! There was and still is only one Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 4:4)!**

Nowhere in the Bible is there any mention or justification for the existence of an overarching leadership system (structure or umbrella organisation)(like a council or synod). The many local congregations (churches) in the New Testament were independent, but consulted, helped and supported one another.

Nowhere in the Bible is there any mention or justification for the existence of a national people's church or ethnic church. The Jewish and Greek believers together formed local churches in Corinth, Ephesus and Rome.

(4) The unity of the Church.

The unity of the world-wide Church and of the very many independent congregations (churches) in the world is preserved by the three principles: self-propagation, self-support and self-government.

- **Self-propagation.** A new congregation takes its *first step towards independence* when it extends itself through evangelism and discipleship (Romans 10:14-17; cf. Acts 2:47; Acts 5:15).
- **Self-support.** A new congregation takes its *second step towards independence* when it financially supports all its own ministries (1 Corinthians 9:14; 1 Timothy 5:17-18).
- **Self-government.** A new congregation *becomes completely independent* when it has chosen and appointed its own council of elders (Acts 14:21-23; Titus 1:5). Every independent congregation may plant new congregations (Acts 13:1-4).

The independent congregations (churches) are the daily visible manifestation of the one Body of Christ.

2. The argument for having an overarching leadership system (structure or umbrella organisation).

See "the synodal church leadership system (structure)".

3. The argument for having one pastor or leader.

See "the synodal church leadership system (structure)".

4. The argument for having superior offices.

See "the synodal church leadership system (structure)".

## H. THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH LEADERSHIP SYSTEM (STRUCTURE) IN CHURCH HISTORY

1. The presbyterian (not a denomination) view of how Christ rules.

- The local congregation is a visible manifestation of the one world-wide Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27).
- The highest and eternal Leader of the Christian Community (Church) is Jesus Christ.
- Jesus Christ is the Founder and Owner of the New Testament Church through his death and resurrection (Acts 20:28). Through his earlier work on earth, his death and his resurrection, and through his present ministry in heaven Jesus Christ is the Builder of his Church (Matthew 16:18). The world-wide Church is his Body and he is the Head of the world-wide Christian Church (Ephesians 1:20-23) and also of every independent congregation in the world (1 Corinthians 12:27).
- Christ exercises his authority in the Church by means of three ways:
  - **By means of the Holy Spirit.** The Holy Spirit is the only Representative of Jesus Christ on earth (John 14:26; John 15:26; John 16:13-15).
  - **By means of the Bible and the instruction of the Bible.** The Bible is the Constitution of the Church (John 8:31-32; Ephesians 6:17; 1 Timothy 3:14-15). The final word about everything belongs only to Jesus Christ (Hebrews 1:1-2) through his Word (Hebrews 4:12). The Holy Spirit and the Bible never contradict each other (Ephesians 6:17)!
  - **And by means of the appointed leaders of the congregation (the council of elders)** (Matthew 18:20; Acts 20:28). The elders must adhere to the Bible (1 Corinthians 4:6; 2 Timothy 2:15; Titus 1:9; Revelation 22:18-19)!
- The council of elders of the local congregation has the authority and final responsibility in the local congregation, but only in dependence on the Holy Spirit and subjected to the sound doctrine and practice of the Bible.
- The priesthood of the believer and the appointed offices (elders and, if needed, also the deacons) receive an important place in the congregation.

2. The presbyterian view of the Church.

(1) The origin of independent congregations (churches).

Independent congregations have their origin in the initiative which God takes (e.g. Acts 2:1-13) and in the subsequent obedience of Christians (e.g. Acts 2:14-47). Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, people are coming to faith (Romans 10:17). The believers join together in a house fellowship (Romans 16:5; Philemon 1:2) or local congregation. The congregations should not grow too large, because that would jeopardise the fellowship of the members. A large congregation can better divide into two smaller and complete independent congregations. Christ is present and active even when there is but two or three believers meeting together (Matthew 18:17,20; cf. Hebrews 10:25).

(2) Every congregation is independent.

- Every local congregation is completely independent and “one hundred percent church”.
- Every local congregation is a manifestation of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27)! A local congregation does not need any overarching leadership structure (umbrella organisation) in order to be a complete (one hundred percent) “church”.
- Every congregation is responsible for the election and appointment of its own elders and, if needed, deacons (1 Timothy 3:1-15).
- The choice of elders (and deacons) and thus the system of leadership or church structure is not dependent on the approval of one or another overarching church system or structure (umbrella organisation)(like a council or synod or overarching council of deacons, etc.). It is also not dependent on the church order of one or another denomination, or dependent on the statutes of a church denomination, but should be dependent only on the teaching of the Bible!
- A congregation is not dependent on the approval of any overarching church system or structure (umbrella organisation) for the appointment of elders that preach and teach (1 Timothy 5:17) or for the appointment of young elders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5) when they qualify according to the Bible (1 Timothy 3:1-16; Titus 1:5-9)!
- Every congregation is responsible that the sound doctrine is proclaimed, taught and maintained in their midst (Titus 1:9; 1 Timothy 1:3-4).
  - Only the apostles of Jesus Christ had the authority to write letters to all the congregations (churches) in which they completed the revelation of Christ (e.g. the New Testament) (John 16:12-16). Only the apostles of Jesus Christ had the authority to command congregations to stick to the sound teaching (Matthew 16:18-19; Matthew 18:18; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-2; 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15; 1 Corinthians 14:37-38; 2 Timothy 1:13).
  - The other workers in the congregation (1 Timothy 1:3) have been given authority to help maintain the sound teaching and sound doctrine in the congregation as taught in the Bible (1 Timothy 1:3-10; 1 Timothy 4:1-6; 2 Timothy 2:14-19; 2 Timothy 3:1-5,16-17; 2 Timothy 4:2-5; Titus 1:10-16; Titus 2:15).
  - The specific formulation of the confession of faith should not be dependent on any overarching leadership structure or on any church order or statutes or on any denomination. It should be dependent on only the truth revealed in the Bible (1 Corinthians 15:1-4; Galatians 1:6-10).
- Every congregation is responsible for discipline in its midst (i.e. rebuke, correction, punishment and restoration) (Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Corinthians 5:9-13; 2 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-14). It is also responsible to discipline its leaders when they sin (1 Timothy 5:19-20). Only in serious cases of conflict within the council of elders, the council of elders should involve the council of elders of another independent congregation to help them resolve the issue (2 John en 3 John).
- Every congregation is responsible for maintaining the good order in their own congregation (1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Corinthians 14:33,40; 1 Timothy 2:8-9; Titus 2:1-15). The specific order of the liturgy should not be dependent on the approval of any overarching leadership structure, or any church order or statutes, but only on the teachings of the Bible!
- Every congregation should be self-supporting and responsible for managing its own finances (1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Corinthians 9:14; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4). Because there are no overarching leadership structures (or umbrella organisations) within the presbyterian system, the local churches do not have to pay over money to maintain such structures (the councils, classes and synods).
- Every congregation is responsible for its obedience to the great commission (Matthew 28:18-20) and the cultural commission (Genesis 1:27-28).

(3) The offices of the congregation.

- Both “the unofficial office of believers” (the priesthood of the believers) and “the official office of elders” are important in the congregation. The office of the believers and the office of the elders complement one another and keep one another in balance.
- The office of the believer consists of:
  - being “a priest” who prays, brings sacrifices (1 Peter 2:4-5,9-10) and serves (1 Peter 4:10-11)
  - being “a prophet” who witnesses and shares God’s Word with others (1 Peter 2:9; 1 Peter 3:15-16)
  - being “a king” who conquers sin (1 Peter 1:14-15), the sinful world (1 Peter 4:3), evil spirits (1 Peter 5:8) and takes part in proclaiming the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33).
- The purpose is that every believer receives a place and task in the local congregation and if possible also in the world-wide Church (1 Corinthians 12:12-28).
- There is one “official office” within the congregation, namely of “the elder” (Acts 20:17-31; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 1 Timothy 5:17-22; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4). There may be an assistant office of “the deacon”, only if really necessary (Acts 6:1-7). These offices have been appointed by Jesus Christ through his apostles. Jesus Christ builds his Church through his apostles (Matthew 16:18-19; Acts 1:1-2,8). Therefore the office of “elder” must receive an important place in the congregation. An elder that preaches and teaches God’s Word or directs the affairs of the congregation fulltime or part-time may receive financial support from the local congregation. But *with respect to his position* he must remain equal to the other elders (1 Timothy 5:17-18). He is not permitted to claim the first position (the “primus inter pares”) for himself (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4; 3 John 9-10). Jesus Christ and the apostles

do not permit any elder (priest, minister, pastor or leader) “to lord it over” the other elders or the members of the congregation (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4; 3 John 9-10). It is therefore best *not to utilize titles* as “pastor”, “reverent” or “leader” for such fulltime or part-time elders!

- The highest office in the local congregation and in the world-wide Church belongs only to Jesus Christ and not to any human being (like a pope, patriarch, bishop, pastor, minister, leader or moderator). Jesus Christ is “the Head” of both the world-wide Church and the local congregation (Ephesians 1:22). The apostles of Jesus Christ were only “the foundational offices” who laid the foundation of the historical Christian Church among the three main groups of people: the Jews, the half-Jews and the non-Jews (Acts 1:8). There are no longer “apostles of Jesus Christ”, only “apostles of the churches” (e.g. missionaries).
- The Bible does not know or acknowledge any office in the Church higher than “the elders” (Greek: presbyteroi). In the time the Bible was written there were no bishops, metropolitans, archbishops, cardinals, popes, or patriarchs; and there were no “dominus” (meaning: lord) in the world-wide Church or local congregations. “An overseer” (Greek: episkopos) in the Bible was *one of the tasks of the elders* (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2-3) *and not an office or position above the elders* (today called: “bishop”)! The Bible does not know or acknowledge any overarching system or umbrella structure above the council of elders and above the local congregations! In the time the New Testament was written, there were no “councils”, “synods” or any other overarching system or umbrella organisation!
- Modern systems or structures as “councils”, “synods”, “conferences”, “boards of foundations” and all other such overarching systems and structures, in so far they exist, may only have a consulting and serving (assisting) function, but never a ruling (lording it over) function!
- There is a clear difference between “an office” and “a spiritual gift”. Ephesians 2:20 teaches that the apostles of Jesus Christ were “the foundation of the historical Church”. Such kinds of “apostles” do not exist anymore! After the apostles of Jesus Christ no one has been personally selected, called, appointed, trained and sent by Jesus Christ while he was still on earth! Therefore after the first coming of Jesus Christ no one would qualify to become an apostle of Jesus Christ (Acts 1:21-22)! The only exception was the calling of the Apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 15:8-9).

But there were and still are “false apostles”, people who claim that they are “apostles” like the apostles of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 11:4-6,13; Revelation 2:2).

Ephesians 4:7-12 does not speak about “the offices in the Church”, but about “the spiritual gifts” (Greek: charis) which Jesus Christ gives to the world-wide Body of Christ at the end of his first coming. These “apostles”, “prophets”, “evangelists”, “shepherds (pastors)” and “teachers” were not “offices” (positions), but were (and still are) specific spiritual gifts with the specific task “to equip the believers for their works of service that build up the Body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-12). They do not have the task to lead the worldwide Church or the local congregation!

It is only the elders in the council of elders who have received “the office and task to lead” the local congregation (Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17,28; 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 1 Timothy 5:17-21, Titus 1:5-9, 1 Peter 5:1-4). Every believer who has received a spiritual gift like for example the gift of being an apostle (missionary) or prophet (preacher), or evangelist, or shepherd (pastor) or teacher must serve and function under the leadership of the local council of elders (Acts 14:23; Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 4:14; 1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

Of course elders may have one of these spiritual gifts. Also other members of the congregation may have one of these spiritual gifts. But the possession of spiritual gifts never gives one the right or authority to rule within the world-wide Church or within the local congregation!

#### (4) Cooperation between the congregations (churches).

- The various local congregations (churches) are independent, but may organise meetings with one another for consultation, assistance and support. They may advise and make recommendations to the congregations, but may never make decisions and set up rules to which the congregations should adhere! All congregations (churches) must remain independent and free from being dominated by any kind of overarching leadership system (structure).
- The congregations (churches) must be hospitable (Hebrews 13:2) and assist other travelling workers in God’s Kingdom (3 John) or support other congregations financially (2 Corinthians chapters 8-9).
- Nevertheless, the congregations (churches) must manage their own finances (Acts 11:27-30; Ephesians 5:17-18; Philippians 4:14-19). They must give an important place to the poorer congregations in the world (1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians chapter 8-9).

### 3. The presbyterian view on the leadership of the Church.

(1) There must be a balance between the congregation and the council of elders.

- The episcopal leadership system emphasises “the office” (of bishop). The congregational leadership system emphasises “the congregation”. The episcopal- and the synodal leadership systems put too much emphasis on “the overarching organisations” (the council of bishops, the classes, the synods, the central body of deacons, etc.). But the presbyterian leadership system resembles most what the New Testament teaches and puts the emphasis on the healthy co-operation between the members and the offices.
- The presbyterian leadership system opposes a hierarchy in which everything is dominated and controlled from the top down: by a pope, a patriarch, a bishop, a council of bishops (the episcopal leadership system), or by a pastor, minister or leader, a synod of delegated pastors and elders, a central body of deacons, etc.)(the synodal leadership system), because both Jesus Christ and the apostles rejected such a system (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4)! The presbyterian leadership system also opposes a leadership system where there are no “offices appointed by Christ” at all, so that in spite of democracy, immature members of the congregation are able to mislead the whole congregation (the congregational leadership system)(Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17,28-31).

(2) The office of “elder” represents the doctrine, life and commission of Jesus Christ.

- In the episcopal leadership system “the office” (namely of “the bishop”) is everything: the bishop is regarded as the representative of Christ on earth or in his bishopric. In the congregational leadership system “the offices” are only the democratically chosen representatives of the congregation who carry out the decisions of the meetings of the congregation. But in the presbyterian leadership system “the office of elder” is important, because he is appointed by the Spirit of Christ (Acts 20:28). In the first place the elder represents the teaching, the life and the mission (cause) of Jesus Christ in the local congregation and society and only in the second place he carries out the decisions of the general assembly of the congregation.
- The elders have been chosen and appointed in the first place to carry out the will of Jesus Christ within the congregation and the local community and only in the second place to carry out the will of the congregation in so far as it agrees with the will of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-4). This means that there are times when the office of elder stands *in opposition to* the congregation (*never above* the congregation as in the episcopal- and synodal system, but *also never below* the congregation as in the congregational system). It may happen that the council of elders has to take a decision which the democratic majority of the congregation does not want to make or may not appreciate at all! It is the calling and responsibility of the council of elders to see to it that the will of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible (correctly interpreted) is carried out!
- The council of elders does not stand in the service of people or a particular tradition (Mark 7:1-13). The council of elders does not stand in the service of a particular ethnic group of people (like the Jews, Acts 4:19-20; Acts 5:29). The council of elders does not stand in the service of any doctrinal denomination or historic modality. The council of elders does not stand in the service of any political or religious party (1 Corinthians 1:12), but only in the service of Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Timothy 2:3-5)!
- Jesus Christ delegates the care of the congregation and its members to a council of elders that fulfil the biblical requisites and can perform the biblical responsibilities (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2)! The council of elders never consists of just one office bearer (e.g. priest, minister, pastor or leader), but always consists of *a plural number* of elders (Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17,28; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

(3) The council of elders.

In a synodal leadership system the council of elders bear only responsibility on the local level, that is, in the local congregation (church), and not on the national level. But in a presbyterian leadership system the council of elders (Greek: presbuterion)(1 Timothy 4:14) has the final authority in all matters concerning the congregation (church) on the local level, the national level and the world-wide level (Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 3:1-7,14-15; 1 Timothy 5:17-22; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4)! The council of elders lead the congregation as a whole. Once the elders have been chosen and appointed (or ordained), they are fully “office bearers”, that is, they stand in the first place in the service of Jesus Christ, his Word and his ministry and only in the second place in the service of the congregation, her members and her plans (goals, activities and organisation).

(4) The tasks of the elders.

- Above all, the council of elders stands in the service of Jesus Christ.

The elders represent the tasks of Jesus Christ as shepherd, manager, teacher and servant and they represent the authority of Jesus Christ *in the congregation* and, if necessary, *over against the congregation*! The council of elders are above all accountable to Jesus Christ (Hebrews 13:17). They are “under-shepherds” under “the Chief Shepherd” (1 Peter 5:2,4)!

- Only in the second place, the council of elders stands in the service of the general meeting of the congregation that had chosen the elders.

The elders also represent the tasks which the general assembly of the congregation had commissioned them to perform. The council of elders are only in the second place accountable to the general assembly of the congregation with respect

to the tasks entrusted to them by Jesus Christ in the Bible and with respect to the tasks delegated to them by the general (annual) meeting of the congregation (Acts 14:26-27).

(5) The authority of the elders.

- Authority within the different leadership systems.

In the episcopal leadership system the offices (the bishops) possess all the authority, even “divine authority”! This, of course is not valid, because “all authority in heaven and on earth” belongs only to Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:18; John 13:3; Ephesians 1:20-23).

In the congregational leadership system the offices only possess “human authority”, that is, authority that has been delegated to them by the general assembly of the congregation. Also this is not valid, because in such a case the general assembly of the congregation would in fact become the overarching leadership structure above the offices in the congregation. The congregation would then have more authority than the offices (elders).

In the synodal leadership system the council of elders have divine and human authority only on the local level, because beyond the local level it is subject to the authority of the overarching structures of leadership (the classis and synod).

But in the presbyterian leadership system only the council of elders have authority on the local level, the national level and the international level, always subject to the highest authority of Jesus Christ and his Word (the Bible).

- The limited divine authority of the elders.

It is God who assigned this limited divine authority to the council of elders (Romans 13:1-2; Acts 4:19-20; Acts 5:29; 3 John 9-10). This authority consists of authority only in the areas of their tasks or responsibilities assigned to them in the Bible.

The elders have authority in their tasks:

- as shepherds and overseers of the people within the congregation (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2-3)
- as directors and managers of the activities and possessions of the congregation (1 Thessalonians 5:12-15; 1 Timothy 3:5; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:7)
- as preachers and teachers of God’s Word to believers and unbelievers (1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 3:2,17; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; 2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 1:9; Titus 2:1,15)
- and as servants of God and of the people (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:2-3).

The elders have authority to exercise Christian discipline (Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; Galatians 2:11-16; 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14-15; 1 Timothy 1:3-7; 1 Timothy 5:20; 2 Timothy 2:25; Titus 1:11; Titus 3:10; 2 John 9-11; 3 John 9-10; Revelation 2:2). The elders also have the responsibility and authority to pronounce the blessing, to baptise, to lead the Lord’s Supper, to appoint (ordain) new offices and to marry and bury people.

Young men, who have been chosen and appointed as elders, have received from God the responsibility and authority to lead, teach, rebuke, correct and, if necessary, discipline *older people* in the congregation (1 Timothy 1:3-5; 1 Timothy 4:11-13; 2 Timothy 2:22-26). However, all elders must carry out their task *with respect* to everyone (1 Timothy 3:2; 1 Timothy 5:1-2; Titus 1:7).

God expects all members of the congregation *to obey* the elders in the areas of their responsibilities (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Hebrews 13:7,17; 1 Peter 5:1-6). The members of the congregation are not permitted to oppose the elders in their responsibilities and authority (Hebrews 13:17). But the members of the congregation together with the other elders (Acts 20:28) must take care that every elder performs his duties in the biblical way. Also the members of the congregation have received from God responsibility and authority and thus the right to study the Bible, to interpret the Bible correctly, and to hold the elders (all leaders) to their God-given responsibilities and calling as written in the Bible (Acts 17:11; cf. 1 Corinthians 4:6)!

The authority of the council of elders is never absolute, but always *limited*. The authority of the council of elders remains limited to the job description of elders in the Bible. For example, the elders have no authority to save, change or use the members of the congregation. The authority to lead people in their personal lives by means of the Word of God, to give spiritual gifts, to assign specific tasks within the congregation or world-wide Church or to call to a particular ministry belongs only to God in Christ and not to the elders of the congregation (1 Corinthians 3:5; 1 Corinthians 12:11; Acts 13:1-4; Acts 26:16-18). The elders may ask a member to prayerfully consider doing a particular task in the congregation, but may never order anyone to any task.

- The limited human responsibility of the elders.

Limited human responsibility has been delegated by the general assembly of the congregation to the elders. For example, the elders have received the responsibility and authority *to execute the yearly plans* (goals, activities, programme and organisation) *and policies* which the general assembly of the congregation has entrusted to them.

The members of the congregation have the responsibility and authority to see to it that the elders lead and serve the congregation by realising their entrusted tasks. During the general assembly of the congregation the elders report (Acts 14:27) what God has accomplished in the midst of the congregation (growth, progress), motivate the congregation about the challenges that remain and submit a detailed financial report.

(6) The accountability of the elders.

All people with a responsibility and authority are accountable to someone else and in the last resort to God. The real authority of the elders is of course the example of their life, their faith and their ministry of God's Word (1 Timothy 4:12,15-16; 2 Timothy 3:10-11; Hebrews 13:7).

The members of the congregation *may not obey* elders who abuse their authority or are themselves disobedient to God and the Bible (Acts 4:19-20; Acts 5:29; 3 John 9-10).

The elders are accountable in three areas:

- above all accountable to Jesus Christ (Hebrews 13:17)
- also accountable to one another in the council of elders (Acts 20:28)
- and finally accountable to the general assembly of the congregation.

The elders should report to the general assembly of the congregation how they have carried out the tasks which God has entrusted to them and the tasks which the congregation has entrusted to them (Acts 13:1-4; Acts 14:27). Elders who sin (who are missing God's goal) must be disciplined (1 Timothy 5:19-22).

(7) The election and appointment (ordination) of elders.

- Requirements of elders.

An elder may never be elected on the basis of his position, power or wealth in society. He may also not be elected on the basis of his personal opinions or the traditional expectations of the other elders and the congregation. On the contrary, he must be elected on the basis of only the biblical requirements and his ability and willingness to perform the biblical tasks of an elder (1 Timothy 3:14-15; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

A man may only be elected as an elder when he fulfils the following biblical requirements (1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9):

- Personal behaviour. He must be self-controlled. He must be honest and not motivated by materialism.
- Family. If he is married, he must be an example of faithfulness to his own wife. If he is still unmarried, he must be an example of purity towards all other people. If he has children, he must raise them in the Christian Faith and with respect towards authority.
- Skills. He may not be a recent convert or a long-time immature believer. He must hold on to the sound teaching of the Bible and able to use the Bible in all aspects of his entrusted tasks.

Men, who demonstrate their ability to lead by the way they live and serve, are without doubt the best candidates for the office of elder in a congregation (Luke 16:10; 2 Corinthians 10:18). No one is allowed to appoint himself as an elder in the congregation. Every brother who freely offers himself to become an elder must first qualify according to the biblical requirements and must then still be elected by the congregation (1 Timothy 3:1). A man may not be appointed as elder by only one elder (the priest, minister, pastor or leader).

- Election from the top down and from the bottom up, but always within the limits set by God's Word.

Only in the presbyterian system the offices are elected and appointed *from the bottom up* and *from the top down*.

- In the episcopal leadership system the offices of the world-wide Church (cardinal, arch-bishop, metropolitan, bishop) and the offices of the local congregation (bishop, priest, deacon) are elected and enforced *only from the top down* and even by the pope or bishop *from outside* the congregation. The members of the congregation have no say (authority) whatsoever.
- In the congregational leadership system the offices are elected by the general assembly of the congregation *only from the bottom up* and *within* the congregation. The members of the congregation have all the say (authority).
- In the presbyterian leadership system the offices (the elders) are nominated at the bottom by the members of the congregation (the believers only), but under supervision at the top by the church planters (in the pioneer phase of church planting only) or by the council of elders (in the established phase of the congregation). Thus, the offices are elected *from the bottom up and from the top down*.
- Because the ordinary members of the congregation took part in the nomination of a new apostle (Acts 1:15-26) and the nomination of new deacons (Acts 6:1-7), they may also take part in the nomination of new elders as was done during the Old Testament period (Deuteronomy 1:9-18).
- In the pioneer phase of the congregation, the first new elders are nominated and elected by the congregation of believers (from the bottom up) under the supervision of the church planters and church builders (from the top down) (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; cf. Hebrews 13:7). The apostles, their fellow-workers and the believers recognised which men the Holy Spirit had already prepared and equipped to take upon themselves the task of an elder (Acts 20:28), because they see the evidence in the lives and ministry of these men (Luke 16:10; 2 Corinthians 10:18).
- But in the established phase of the congregation, new elders are nominated by the congregation of believers (from the bottom up) under the supervision of the existing council of elders who see to it that the congregation elect men only on the basis of the biblical qualifications and biblical tasks (from the top down) (1 Timothy 3:1-7,14-15; 1 Timothy 4:14).
- Practical. Only the members who are actively involved in the congregation should be allowed to nominate and elect candidates for the office of elder.

- The elders are elected, not on the basis of the democratic majority, *but on the basis of the biblical requirements and the general approval (consensus) of the congregation*. The word “appoint” (Greek: cheirotoneo) in Acts 14:23 literally means “to appoint by raising hands” (as was done in the political body in Athens). But in the Bible this word cannot be understood literally, because the same word in Acts 10:41 can only mean “chosen” (by God). In Didache (150 A.D.) it is said that “the (still independent) congregations must appoint their own overseers (elders) and deacons”. The word “appoint” (Greek: kathistemi) in Titus 1:5 usually means “appointing a person to a position of authority” in the Bible. But the word does not have any formal ecclesiastical “ordination” in view, only “an appointment that is ratified by the congregation”.
- Thus both the council of elders and the congregation of members have responsibility and authority, but only within the limits of the biblical teaching! God’s Word should always have the final say! The office of elder may never be sent or enforced *from the top down* or *from the outside* by any person (e.g. a patriarch, bishop, pastor, founder of a congregation) or by any overarching leadership structure (e.g. a council of bishops, classis, synod, conference, board of directors, board of deacons, etc.). Every local congregation must elect and appoint its own elders (including its fulltime elders). The office of “elder” may be held by any male person *who qualifies according to the biblical teaching* (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6).

#### (8) The induction (ordination) of elders.

The newly elected elders are commissioned to the care, protection and leadership of the Lord by prayer and the laying on of hands (Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 4:14). Real authority and real spiritual gifts are only given by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28), not by any human being or any office in the church. The laying on of hands *only symbolises* the transmission of authority and the spiritual gifts necessary to carry out the responsibility of being an elder. The apostle Paul nevertheless warns “not to be hasty in the laying on of hands” in connection to the election of new elders (1 Timothy 5:22).

#### (9) The term of office of elders.

- The Bible says nothing about the term of office of elders. However, the Bible recorded that the apostle Peter and the apostle John were not “elders” in the congregation of Jerusalem for their whole life. After some years they had new tasks in other places (Peter: in Acts 6:2,4; Acts 12:17; 1 Peter 5:1; John: 2 John 1). There is no proof in the Bible that an elder is appointed for his whole life. Also the office of deacon was temporary and lasted only as long as the service was needed (Philip: Acts 6:5; Acts 8:4-5; Acts 21:8).
- Practical. Because nothing is said in the Bible about the term of office of an elder, the congregation has the authority to limit the term of office of an elder (including the fulltime elders, called “priests” or “pastors”) for the following reasons:
  - The Bible never teaches that the office of an elder is “life long”.
  - A term of office avoids the abuse of the office of an elder (3 John 9-10).
  - A term of office of an elder gives other able men an opportunity to lead and have influence within the congregation (1 Timothy 3:1; cf. Deuteronomy 1:9-17).
  - A term of office is also better for the elder because it gives him an opportunity to pursue other important things in life, e.g. his family, personal development and rest (1 Timothy 3:4-5).  
After their term of office as an elder has been completed, these men once more take their place in the congregation, not as “an elder”, but as “an ordinary member”. However, say after one year, they may be elected again to serve another term as an elder if they wish to.
- Of course, elders who have served *well* may once more be elected to serve a second term as an elder. But their term of office as an elder may not be automatically lengthened – they must be elected once more by the members of the congregation according to the biblical teaching! The regulation to limit the term of office of an elder (say to four years) is a safety measure that protects the congregation against a wrong leader who refuses to resign. At the same time it is a practical measure to ensure the smooth continuity of the council of elders.
- Practical. Some *suggestions* to guarantee the continuity of the council of elders:
  - Because the first council of elders lays the foundation of the congregation and there may not yet be enough candidates to follow the first elders up, it may be practical to re-elect these elders for a second term of office.
  - If the congregation chooses to limit the term of office to say four years, then the congregation could elect a few new elders every two years in order to safeguard the continuity of the council of elders. Thus, every two years say two existing elders step down and two new elders are elected to take their place on the council of elders.
  - When the number of believers in the congregation is growing, the number of elders on the council of elders must also continue to grow. If there are a sufficient number of qualified men available, the congregation could elect one elder for say every twenty members in the congregation.
  - The council of elders is responsible for the training and equipping of potential candidates for the office of elder.
  - Instead of allowing the congregation to grow too large, the congregation could divide into two smaller (independent) congregations. A smaller congregation is much easier to manage than a large congregation.
  - In areas where only house churches (house fellowships) exist, say eight house churches together could elect a council of elders.

(10) The support of elders.

The Bible teaches that people who preach and teach the Word of God may receive their life support from their task (1 Corinthians 9:14; Galatians 6:6). The Bible teaches that “elders who direct the affairs of the church (congregation) *well*, are worthy of “double honour”, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching God’s Word (1 Timothy 5:17-18).

However, 1 Timothy 5:17 does not justify the differentiation between “fulltime elders” and “lay elders”. In Church History a practice developed to accord a higher position to “elders who have completed a theological study” and are called “priests”, “pastors” or “leaders” today than to “lay elders” who have not had any theological training and have to work for their own income. This Bible passage does not compare the fulltime elders with the lay elders, but rather “the elders that do their task *well*” with “the elders who do not do their task so well”. There are also theological trained men who do not do their task well and there are ordinary men who do their task well. The Bible teaches that fulltime and lay elders who do their tasks *well* have the right to receive respect and the right to receive financial support, if needed.

(11) The priority of elders.

The Bible teaches that “there is a time for everything” (Ecclesiastes 3:1; Ecclesiastes 8:5-6). Elders have more responsibilities than only being an elder in the congregation.

- Elders have the responsibility to maintain their personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, to continually grow as a disciple, to learn more from him and to develop Christian character and skills.
- Elders also have the responsibility to work for their own income without “wearing themselves out to get rich (Proverbs 23:4-5; 1 Timothy 6:9).
- Elders have the responsibility to direct the affairs of their own family well (1 Timothy 3:4-5; Titus 1:6).

The tasks of the elders may never become so burdensome and so time consuming that the elders neglect their other God-given responsibilities! The elders on the council of elders have the responsibility “to keep watch over” one another (Acts 20:28). If an elder does not function as he should, he should have the wisdom and courage to resign or he should be asked or required to step down.

#### 4. The presbyterian view on consultations.

- Acts 15 does not teach the existence of an overarching leadership structure like a council or synod!

See “the argument for having an overarching church structure” under “the synodal leadership system”.

- Mutual consultations with other congregations.
  - The authority of consultations between independent congregations.

In the episcopal- and synodal leadership systems the overarching leadership systems have a greater authority than the councils of elders of the local congregations (churches).

In the congregational- and the presbyterian leadership systems consultation meetings between the independent congregations have no authority over any of the local congregations (churches). The local congregations (churches) are always completely independent of all the other local congregations.

- The establishment of a denomination.

The establishment of “a denomination” between a number of local congregations (churches) with their own name, their own confession of faith and their own church organisation structure is not taught anywhere in the Bible. On the contrary, all the Christians in one place (Acts 1:15; Acts 2:44) were known as “the Church” (Acts 5:11), “disciples” (Acts 6:1,7), “the Way” (Acts 9:2) or “Christians” (Acts 11:26). And the local congregations were known as “the congregation in so and so a place” (Acts 13:1; 1 Corinthians 1:2).

- Consultations should remain “consulting” meetings and not be changed into “decision making” meetings.

The meetings between several local congregations (churches) in the Bible were never decision making meetings where binding decisions were made to which all the participating congregations had to adhere. They were only consultation meetings where mutual interests were discussed (Acts 15:1-31; Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4). The leaders and members of independent local congregations (churches) do not have sufficient knowledge or insight in the matters of other independent local congregations. They have therefore received no authority from God to make or to enforce decisions over other independent local congregations.

Of course, Christians and Christian leaders may use the Bible to teach, rebuke, correct and train other Christians in the world (2 Timothy 3:16-17), or expose their sins (Matthew 18:15-17), or encourage them (Hebrews 3:12-13), or build their faith (Acts 15:32; Ephesians 4:1-16; 3 John 5-8). Also the council of elders may request the council of elders of a sister congregation to help in a matter that has reached a deadlock (Acts 15:1-31), or for financial support (2 Corinthians chapter 8-9), or to tackle a mutual project (like evangelism in the city).

- Some good reasons for consultations between congregations are:
  - To discuss Faith and Conduct (dogmatic and ethical issues) within the community.
  - To pray with and for each other.

- To plan mutual activities as evangelism, missions, deaconate, equipping, festivals and conferences.
- To request one another's help in the use of buildings, difficult disciplinary cases, persecution, etc.

## 5. The advantages of a presbyterian leadership system (structure).

- A balance between the congregation and the council of elders.

In an episcopal church leadership system (structure) the ordinary believer has no say at all and remains immature.

In a congregational church leadership system (structure) man takes too much a central position. Too many members are still relatively immature and therefore have no spiritual discernment. Immature Christians can get sidetracked, act selfishly, form conflicting parties (1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 1 Corinthians 3:1-4) and derail the congregation (cf. the first letter to the Corinthians).

In a synodal church leadership system (structure) the overarching structure (classis or synod) sometimes obstructs or limits the council of elders of a local congregation in carrying out her God-given tasks,

In a presbyterian church leadership system (structure) the congregation of believers and the council of elders hold one another in balance around Jesus Christ as Leader, the Holy Spirit as God's Guide and the Bible as God's Map (revelation).

The council of elders consists of the most mature, spiritual and experienced men that the local congregation can find (Acts 14:23) and who fulfil the biblical requirements for an elder (Titus 1:5-9).

Above all, the council of elders stands in the service of Jesus Christ, its Head, with the responsibility (task) to take care that the will and cause of Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Bible, is carried out in the congregation. The council of elders has the God-given responsibility to lead the whole congregation in the way of Jesus Christ (Acts 20:17-31). The elders of the congregation are called (appointed or ordained) by Jesus Christ and the members of the congregation to represent the tasks of Jesus Christ as *shepherd of the people*, as *manager of the activities and possessions*, as *teacher of the Word of God* and as *servant of God and people* in the midst of the congregation.

The council of elders walks as the leader in the front (1 Timothy 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; Romans 12:8) and directs (Titus 1:7) the whole congregation in an effective way in these responsibilities.

- The Christian Church is not a democracy, but a Christocracy.

In the congregational church leadership system (structure) decisions that have been made by means of democratic voting *could deviate* from the biblical truth. "The majority" in the congregation are not necessarily "right" (Acts 5:17-42). The congregational church leadership system or structure does not have any office<sup>14</sup> that has been officially appointed by Jesus Christ to keep the congregation to their biblical calling of carrying out the will and cause of Jesus Christ.

In the presbyterian church leadership system (structure) decisions may only be made by the elders and the members of the congregation on the basis of the Bible correctly interpreted. The council of elders must take a stand, if necessary, against the majority in the congregation when this majority deviates from the Bible! The elders have the God-given authority to do this, because the elders have been appointed by the Spirit of Christ to be the elders (Acts 20:28), because the elders have been chosen and approved by the congregation (cf. Deuteronomy 1:13; Acts 1:15-16,21-22) and because the elders have been authorised to motivate their teachings, decisions and actions with only the Bible (of course, correctly interpreted)(Titus 1:9)!

- The council of elders watches over the doctrine and the conduct of the congregation.

In the Congregational Churches the various churches have grown apart and each congregation is taking its own course and direction. Congregational Churches sometimes have no unified or clear biblical confession of faith, church order and liturgical formula to which the offices in the congregation are bound.

In the Presbyterian Churches the council of elders watch over the sound doctrine and conduct of the members of the congregation (Titus 1:9). The sound doctrine and conduct is recorded in a clear biblical statement of faith and a practical church order (statutes and regulations). There is also thorough teaching (i.e. catechism)<sup>15</sup> for the new believers in the doctrine and life of being a Christian (1 Timothy 4:11-16; 2 Timothy 3:16 – 4:5).

- The council of elders watches over the biblical order and love.

The council of elders watch over the biblical order (1 Corinthians 14:33,40) and love in relationships (1 Corinthians chapter 13) within the congregation. The council of elders watch against the domination of one person (like an authoritarian pastor or outspoken elder or arrogant teacher) (3 John 1:9-10). The council of elders take care that no one lords it over others within the congregation (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:2-3).

<sup>14</sup> Offices like the other elders, deacons, missionaries, preachers, evangelists, pastors, teachers, youth leaders, etc.

<sup>15</sup> Catechism by means of a discipleship course as "the delta course" ([www.deltacourse.org](http://www.deltacourse.org))

- The council of elders makes use of church discipline.

In the congregational-, synodal- and presbyterian church leadership systems there is room for the ordinary members to exercise mutual rebuke, correction and discipline (Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-5; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; 2 Timothy 3:16). The more difficult cases are reserved for the council of elders (or other offices) who usually has more knowledge, wisdom and experience in such matters (Matthew 18:17; 1 Timothy 5:19-20).

Believers must courageously, firmly and mercifully resist all church leaders who disobey Jesus Christ and his Word (Luke 11:37-54; Acts 4:19-20; Acts 5:29; 2 Corinthians 10:2-6; 3 John 9-10).

- The council of elders stimulates the priesthood of the believers.

In the congregational-, synodal- and presbyterian church systems the priesthood of believers is emphasized – each believer has a possible spiritual gift, a specific task and a unique way of manifesting his or her contribution (1 Corinthians 12:3-7) within the congregation. Every believer is important and, if possible, is given a task within the congregation (1 Corinthians 12:12-28).

- The council of elders take contextualisation serious.

In the Episcopal Churches every congregation is obliged to have the same theology, the same culture, the same hierarchical structure, the same activities and the same liturgy. They are obliged to express Christian life in the same forms, values, customs and institutions, which are often traditional.

But in the Congregational-, Synodal- and Presbyterian Churches

- the independent congregations may adapt their *message* in words and ways that are understood by the hearers. For example: instead of presenting the message only in terms of “the justification of people that are guilty (sinners)”, to also present the message in terms of “the cleansing or purification of people that have been shamed (the impure)”.
- Their *messengers* may adapt their cultural ways of relating, communication and making decisions, etc. For example: instead of “ministering to groups in which men and women are mixed”, to minister to men and women separately”. Instead of “teaching the Bible exegetically” also “tell Bible stories” and “act out the Bible message”.
- Their *institutions* may be adapted to meet the current needs. For example: instead of “educating children in Sunday schools only”, have a more holistic approach and “develop the intellectual-, physical-, emotional-, social- and spiritual skills of children.”
- And their *forms* (activities and liturgy) may be adapted to attract (draw) people in their own context in an attractive way closer to Christ. This is called “contextualisation”.

The truth of the Bible may never be changed! But

- the way in which *the message* is presented
- the way in which *the messenger* lives and communicates
- the various different *institutions* (schools, sports, personal help, clubs, Sunday school, youth club, men’s breakfasts, women’s association, training in evangelism, discipleship training, equipping believers to serve in various ways, leadership training, theological training, etc.)
- and the various different *forms* in which the Christian life is expressed (ways of worship and prayer, preaching or telling stories, the way of greeting one another or fellowshiping together, etc.

must be understood and resonate within each community in which the culture is different.

The council of elders must guide the congregation, not only in the unalterable biblical truth, but also in the Christian world-view (the view of God and reality), the Christian values (what is right and wrong), the Christian customs (how to behave and relate) and Christian institutions (theology, education, pastoral, health, justice, social, psychological, etc.) that best serves their target group. No council of elders is equipped to do all this. That is why Christian congregations should have consultations with each other, receive continual training and *function as healthy inter-dependent churches*.

A congregation may want to reach out to the youth of their generation, or to a particular neighbourhood (with lots of foreign immigrants), or to a particular social class (factory workers), or to a particular language and culture (the Chinese or Arabs), or to a specific group (the university students, the handicapped), or to people with another religious background (the Hindus, the Buddhists, the Muslims), etc. (Acts 11:19-26; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

But a congregation may never refuse admittance and acceptable participation of anyone that does not belong to their target group. The congregation (church) is never owned by the founder or the leaders or the members as a whole, but is at all times owned by only Jesus Christ who bought them with his precious blood (Mark 10:45; Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 1 Corinthians 10:32; 2 Thessalonians 1:1,4; 1 Timothy 3:5,15; 1 Peter 1:18-19; Revelation 2:1). The council of elders only have authority to guide the congregation under the leadership of Jesus Christ, according to his truth (the Bible) and in dependence of his Spirit (the Holy Spirit).

- The council of elders initiates the planting of new congregations.

In the congregational- and presbyterian systems of churches the congregations (churches) are kept to a manageable number, so that the members continue to know one another. Thus, the ministry can remain effective and new congregations can be planted within the local community and within travelling distance of the people (like the house fellowships or house churches during the early New Testament period).

## 6. The disadvantage of the presbyterian leadership system (structure).

The visible *unity in church structure and form* of independent congregations in the presbyterian system may be less uniform than those of the Episcopal- and Synodal Churches and their leadership structures. But they are biblical and most practical.

Especially *the diversity within the unity* is much more likely to be attractive to outsiders!

- Unity in teaching the biblical truth
- Unity in practising Christian love
- And the diversity within this unity.

## I. CLOSING REMARKS, CONCLUSIONS, SUMMARY AND BIBLE REFERENCES

### 1. Closing remarks

- The ideal of a visible church denomination.

The ideal of a visible church denomination is impossible due to the fall into sin (Genesis 3), the confusion of languages (Genesis 11) and the resulting large number of different cultures (world-views, values, norms, customs, etc.) existing in the world today. The different languages and cultures (values and norms) are a direct result of God's sovereign plan to fill the earth (Genesis 1:28) and to cause people living at all times and in all places to reach out to him (Acts 17:26-27).

- The enforcement of a visible ideal.

The enforcement of a specific language, a specific race, a specific culture, a specific structure and form onto any Christian congregation can only lead to more conflict and disunity. But without clear communication in the same language and a great amount of agreement in culture (faith, behaviour and customs) cooperation between local churches would be difficult. Therefore, a consultation between these congregations (churches) (without the enforcement of decisions) would be much more beneficial than forging a unified denomination (in which the independence of the congregations is lost).

- The three principles of genuine unity of the Church.

The best guideline for the various dependent and independent churches would be:

- Unity in essential things.

Things that are essential: the confession of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord; the Bible as God's Word, authoritative for doctrine and behaviour; the apostolic confession and the visible relationships of love (Ephesians 4:1-16).

- Acceptance (and freedom) in non-essential things.

Things that are not essential: the acceptance of differences in language, culture, church order (statutes and regulations), liturgy, activities (Romans 14:1 - 15:10).

- Love in everything.

The practice of love in personal relationships and in the consultation meetings with each other (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a).

### 2. Conclusions

- Church systems or structures remain the work of humans.

All church systems and their church leadership systems remain limited (incomplete and imperfect), because human beings can never be complete or perfect on this side of the second coming of Jesus Christ (1 John 3:1-3)!

- The statement of Augustine.

"In every attempt to help the Shepherd open and close the door of the sheepfold, some sheep are locked out and some wolves are locked in!"

- Unity in diversity.

Unity between congregations (churches) can hardly be attained on the basis of *uniformity* in all doctrines and in uniformity in statutes, regulations and procedures.

Unity in the Bible is not based on organisation of the different congregations (churches), but on basis of the following:

- the sovereign and orderly rule (reign) of Jesus Christ in hearts and lives of Christians through the Bible, his Spirit and the local council of elders (1 Corinthians 12:3; 1 Corinthians 14:40b)
- the same confession of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord (Acts 4:12; Ephesians 4:1-6,12-16).
- the acceptance of the great variety within the one Body of Christ
- and Christian love in all relationships (1 Corinthians 12:4 - 13:8a).

In the one Body of Christ there is a great diversity of members with respect to their language and culture, age, education, professions, jobs, personalities, characters, spiritual gifts, ministries within the Body and the manifestations of those skills and ministries (1 Corinthians 12:4-7).

The emphasis in the Bible is on *maximum spiritual unity* and *minimum organisational unity*.

### 3. Summary

It is contended that all four church leadership systems (structures) are taught in the Bible and that every church is allowed to choose one of them. It is also claimed that each of these church leadership systems (structures) have a right to existence. Some people argue that God does not care which leadership system (structure) is chosen and that he leads each church to one of these leadership systems (structures).

However, these arguments are not true! Jesus Christ and his apostles clearly taught and prayed for unity among all Christians (John 17:20-24; Ephesians 4:1-16). The Bible teaches that the Body of Christ (the world-wide Church) does not consist of an “x” amount of denominations, but rather teaches very clearly what this one Church is (1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 1:22-23) and how it should be governed (1 Timothy 3:15; cf. 1 Corinthians 4:6).

It is also not true that all four church leadership systems (structures) are completely based on the Bible. The majority of church leadership systems (structures) are *based on only a few passages in the Bible*, but not on all the evidence in the Bible!

(1) The episcopal church leadership system is based on “bishops”.

The word “episcopal” is derived from the Greek word “episkopos”, which means “overseer” and was *one of the tasks of an elder*. But this word was later changed to denote, not the task of an elder, but a new office or position above the elders, called “a bishop”.

The advocates of the episcopal system of church leadership base their view on the following:

- on the hierarchical structure of the Old Testament Law about the priesthood (a high priest, priests and Levites)
- on what Jesus Christ said to Peter in Matthew 16:18-19
- on the fact that the words “bishop” (Greek: episkopos) and “priests (Greek: presbyteroi) are found in the New Testament (Titus 1:5,7)
- on Church History in the second and third century A.D. and historical traditions (1 Corinthians 11:2; 1 Corinthians 15:3).

But the Episcopal Churches neglect the following facts:

- that the New Testament teaches no hierarchical leadership structure (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4)
- that what Jesus said to Peter in Matthew 16:18-19 means something different - it certainly does not teach “the apostolic succession”, but rather *the historic establishment* of churches (congregations) by the apostles of Christ among the three major people groups in the Bible: the Jews, the half-Jews and the non-Jews (Acts 1:8; Acts ch. 2, 8, and 10-11).
- that the words “overseer” and “elder” refer to the same office and are interchangeable terms in the New Testament
- that the Bible clearly teaches the priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:9-10)
- and that the Bible does not allow human traditions in Church History to overrule the teachings of the Bible (Matthew 15:1-20; 1 Corinthians 4:6).

(2) The congregational church leadership system is based on “a union”.

The word “congregation” is derived from the Latin word “congregatio” and means: “an association of people” or “a congregation”.

The advocates of the congregational system of church leadership base their view on the following:

- on the fact that the Bible teaches no hierarchical system of leadership
- on the fact that no one should be called “master”, “father” or “teacher” (Matthew 23:8-12)
- on the complete independence of every local congregation (church) (Revelation 1:12-13,20; Revelation 2:7; 2 John 13)
- on the priesthood of every believer
- and on the functioning of the whole local congregation as a body in which every member of the body has a place, a task and a spiritual gift (1 Corinthians 12:12-28).

But the Congregational Churches neglect the following facts:

- that the Bible clearly teaches “the office” (the official appointment by God) of an elder and of elders in the plural (Acts 20:28)
- that these elders should lead the congregation united in “a council of elders” (1 Timothy 4:14)
- and that the Christian Church is “not a democracy”. The democratic majority of votes of the congregation may never set aside the commands and teachings of the Bible (Matthew 15:3; Acts 15:28; 1 Corinthians 4:6).

(3) The synodal church leadership system is based on “an umbrella organisation”.

The word “synodal” is derived from the Greek word “sunodos” which means “together on the way” (e.g. all congregations walk on the same way).

The advocates of the synodical system of church leadership base their view on the following:

- on a supposed hierarchical umbrella organisation in Acts 15
- on the independence of every congregation on the local level, but not on the national-, ethnic- or denominational level
- on the office of an elder functioning in a council of elders
- in some congregations “a council of deacons” instead of “a council of elders” (!)
- and on the office or priesthood of the believer. All Christians need to function with their tasks and gifts.

But the Synodal Churches neglect the following facts:

- that the New Testament teaches no hierarchical structure of leadership or any overarching (umbrella) organisation
- that the New Testament does not acknowledge any political “state church” (Matthew 28:19; John 10:16; Romans 1:5; Romans 16:26; Ephesians 1:20-23) or any “ethnic people’s church” (Romans 9:24-26; Romans 10:12-13, Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:14-19; Ephesians 3:2-6; Ephesians 4:3-6; Colossians 3:11; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Revelation 5:9-10) or any kind of “denomination” (Ephesians 1:22-23)
- and that the Church is not a democracy and the democratic majority of votes in the council of elders or any of the so-called umbrella organisations may never set aside the teachings of the Bible.

(4) The presbyterian church leadership system is based on a congregation with “a council of elders”.

The word “presbyterian” is derived from the Greek word “presbuteros” which means “elder”. The word does not refer to any existing denomination!

The advocates of the presbyterian system of church leadership base their view on the following facts:

- The Bible correctly interpreted must be the only basis for Christian doctrine, Christian life and Church structure (Matthew 7:24-27; Matthew 15:3; John 8:31-32; John 17:17; Acts 4:19-20; Acts 5:29; Acts 17:11; Acts 20:27-32; 1 Corinthians 4:6; Ephesians 5:25-26; Ephesians 6:17; Philippians 4:9; Colossians 3:16; 1 Timothy 3:14-15; 1 Timothy 5:21; 2 Timothy 1:13; 2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Titus 1:9; Hebrews 4:12; James 1:22-25; 2 Peter 1:20-21; 1 John 2:14; 2 John 9-11; Revelation 3:7-8; Revelation 22:18-19).
- All human church traditions in Church History may not form the basis of Christian doctrine, Christian ethics and Christian Church leadership structure (Matthew 15:1-14; Colossians 2:8). Even the Old Testament Law may not set aside the teachings of the New Testament about the church leadership structure (Colossians 2:17; Hebrews 7:11-28; Hebrews 8:5-6; Hebrews 10:1). The Bible teaches that the Old Testament high priest has been replaced by the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 7:11-28)! The Old Testament priests have been replaced by the priesthood of believers (1 Peter 2:9-10). The Old Testament Levites have been abrogated, because their ministry with respect to the animal sacrifices have been fulfilled (Hebrews 9:8-28).
- Every local congregation (church) is completely independent and no one and nothing must be allowed to lord it over the local congregation except the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27; 2 Thessalonians 1:1,4; Revelation 1:12-13,20; Revelation 2:7; 2 John 13).
- There may not be any hierarchical or overarching church leadership structure above the council of elders of the local congregation (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4).
- All consultations between congregations about matters of mutual interest must take place on the basis of equivalence (Acts 15:1-31; Galatians 2:1-21).
- All Christians and all local churches in the world are spiritually “one” (John 17:20-24; Ephesians 4:1-17; Philippians 2:1-2).
- All congregations must be completely open for all ethnic and socially different groups of people. All congregations ought to welcome and include people from other cultures in their congregations (churches). This will be for their own benefit (Matthew 28:19; John 10:16; Romans 1:5; Romans 16:26; Ephesians 1:20-23).
- The basis for a congregation (church) may never be a political state, or an ethnic (cultural) group, or a denomination (Romans 9:24-26; Romans 10:12-13, Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:14-19; Ephesians 3:2-6; Ephesians 4:3-6; Colossians 3:11; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Revelation 5:9-10).
- The presbyterian church leadership system is based on the biblical office of “the elder” (Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 3:1-15; 1 Timothy 5:17-22; Titus 1:5-7; 1 Peter 5:1-4)
- The presbyterian church leadership system is based on the elders functioning in “a council of elders” (Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17,28; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 4:14; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; Hebrews 13:7,17; 1 Peter 5:1-4).
- The style of leadership in the Presbyterian Churches should always be “servant leadership” (never ruling leadership) and “shared leadership” (never single person leadership) (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4; 3 John 9-10).
- The presbyterian church leadership system is based on “the priesthood of every believer” (1 Peter 2:9-10).
- The presbyterian church leadership system is based on “functioning like a body” with each member in the body functioning with his task and gift (1 Corinthians 12:12-28).
- All decisions should be based on the Bible correctly interpreted (Matthew 15:3; 1 Corinthians 4:6; Revelation 22:18-19). It should not be based on the Old Testament Ceremonial Law which has been *fulfilled* (Matthew 5:17),

*cancelled* (Colossians 2:14) and *abrogated* (Ephesians 2:14-15). It should not be based on any human or church tradition (Matthew 15 1-14; Colossians 2:8). Every decision must be based on the consensus of the Holy Spirit and the Christians present (Acts 15:28; Ephesians 6:17) and never on the democratic majority of votes. If consensus cannot be reached immediately, more time must be given to Bible study and prayer.

#### 4. The most important Bible references and responsibilities.

##### (1) The leaders.

Bible references. Matthew 15:1-20; Matthew 16:18-19; Matthew 18:18; Matthew 20:25-28; Acts 20:17,28; Ephesians 1:20-23; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 5:11-4.

##### Responsibilities.

Every leader in the church and every congregation must time and again ask themselves the following questions.

- Who is the eternal Leader of the Church? (Ephesians 1:20-23)
- Who were the foundational leaders in the history of the Church? (Matthew 16:18-19; Ephesians 2:20)
- Who are the appointed leaders in the congregation? (Acts 20:17,28)
- What does the Bible teach about position with regard to leaders? (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4)
- What does the Bible teach about traditions? (Matthew 15:1-20)

##### (2) The elders.

Bible references. Acts 20:17,28; 1 Timothy 3:1-15; 1 Timothy 4:14; 1 Timothy 5:17-22; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4.

##### Responsibilities.

- (1) An elder is a shepherd (Latin: pastor) and overseer (Greek: episkopos) of God's people in the congregation (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2-3). Discipline is a pastoral responsibility (Matthew 18:17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Corinthians 2:5-11; Galatians 2:11-16; 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14-15; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 1 Timothy 5:20; 2 Timothy 2:25; Titus 1:11; Titus 3:10; 2 John 9-11; 3 John 9-10; Revelation 2:2).
- (2) An elder is a steward, director or manager of the activities and possessions of the congregation (1 Timothy 3:5; 1 Timothy 5:17a; Titus 1:7; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15). Accountability to God (Hebrews 13:17), to the body of elders (Acts 20:28) and to the general assembly of the congregation (Acts 14:27) is a responsibility of all the offices in the congregation.
- (3) An elder is a teacher of God's Word (1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 3:2; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:9; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; 2 Timothy 4:2; Titus 2:1,15). A teacher may never go beyond what is written in the Bible (1 Corinthians 4:6).
- (4) An elder is a servant of God and people. His style of leadership is serving instead of lording it over others (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

##### (3) The church planters.

Bible references. Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 14:21-23; Philippians 2:19-24; 1 Thessalonians 3:2; 1 Timothy 1:3; 1 Timothy 3:1-15; 1 Timothy 4:12-16; Titus 1:5-9; Titus 2:1,7-8.

##### Responsibilities.

- (1) A church planter develops self-propagation of a congregation. He promotes evangelism, discipleship and sound doctrine and behaviour in the congregation (1 Timothy 1:3; Titus 2:1).
  - (2) A church planter develops self-support of a congregation. He establishes a sound financial policy in the congregation (2 Corinthians ch. 8 and 9), teaching the congregation to generate its own income, never to exceed its budget and to make monthly financial reports.
  - (3) A church planter develops self-government of the congregation. He builds up the biblical church leadership structure instead of a traditional denominational structure (Acts 14:21-23; 1 Timothy 3:1-15; Titus 1:5-9).
  - (4) A church planter sets the example (1 Timothy 4:12-16; Titus 2:7-8).
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