

The True Nature of a Gospel Church

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The Teaching of Holy Scripture Concerning the Church

The Church consists of those who are called “saints” (1 Cor. 1:2, 6:9-11), set apart from the world to make up the visible kingdom of God upon the earth in the church (see WCOF 25:2). Saints are called to make up the Church of Christ, the Household of God, to serve God, and to seek to honor and glorify Him in each generation (*Works*, XVI:11).

The Church of Christ should be distinguished between the invisible church made up of all the elect from Adam and Eve to those who will truly believe and put their trust in Christ alone, and the visible church made up of both the regenerate and unregenerate, whose membership depends upon a “credible profession of faith” before the elders. Those who are truly regenerated by the Spirit of God, or “born from above” are truly members of Christ’s Church (John 3:3ff; Tit. 3:3-5). Although there are many who are members of the visible church of Christ who profess to be believers while remaining unregenerate. Only God can judge the heart, although Christians in the visible church, and especially the officers of the church must seek to judge the evidence of fruit in one’s profession and life (*Works*, XVI:12-15).

In the confession and profession made before God and the church, the Christian should be professing and living in subjection to the authority, or Kingship of Christ and the Gospel, and to be ready to yield obedience to His commands. What should be required for membership in the visible church that helps the officers of the local congregation to accurately judge the profession of the members’ faith? (*Works*, XVI:15-17)

1. A competent knowledge of the doctrines and mysteries of the Gospel, especially understanding the Person and Offices of Christ.
2. A subjection of soul and conscience unto the authority of Christ in the Church (Matt. 28:18-20).
3. Instruction in and consent to the doctrine of self-denial and bearing the cross (Luke 9:23).
4. Conviction and confession of sin, with the only way of salvation found in Jesus Christ.
5. Constant or consistent performance of all known duties of religion.
6. A careful abstinence from all known sins that would dishonor God or bring scandal upon the Lord’s Church.

The visible Church will necessarily have hypocrites as well as sincere believers until the coming of Christ. We should not expect that there will ever be a perfect church on earth until the Glorious Restoration of all things at the Second Coming of Our Lord Jesus (*Works*, XVI:18-21). We must be wise in our determining a true visible Church of Christ on earth, some can decline spiritually into very “synagogues of Satan” (see WCOF, 25:5) and are no true churches at all, but we should not expect a perfect church. If one cannot in good conscience remain in a local visible church, then it is their duty before Christ to “peaceably withdraw from the communion of such churches” (*Works*, XVI:22)

The Formal Cause of a Particular Church

The mutual cause of a particular, visible church is through “mutual confederation” (*Works*, XVI:25). This confederation of professing believers in a local congregation is the formal cause of the church (*Works*, XVI:28). The Lord Jesus has commanded that we be part of “such societies” to be disciple by the word and to be taught to do and observe all his commands (Matt. 28:19-20). Owen seeks to assert that a person is not obligated to join a particular church, but must join a congregation by “actual, express voluntary consent” (*Works*, XVI:26-28). What must be observed about particular churches or congregations are (*Works*, XVI:26-30):

1. By the authority of Jesus Christ, he has appointed churches of which his people are to be members.
2. He has granted powers and privileges (preaching of Word, Sacraments, discipline, fellowship, membership benefits, etc.) to His Church.
3. Christ requires and commands all of his disciples to join themselves in these kind of church relations.
4. The joining of themselves together in a local congregation is a voluntary act of obedience of faith to the authority of Christ.
5. Members are to give themselves to the Lord and to one another in this way (2 Cor. 8:5).
6. The members are to engage to do and observe all that Christ has appointed and commanded.
7. Joining a church has the nature of a covenant on our part to resign ourselves as members to the will, power, and authority of Christ.
8. Joining a church is to be with an end of glorifying God and mutual edification in the Lord (*Works*, XVI:29).

The Polity, Rule, or Discipline of the Church in General

The church is organic, or a corporate body. The church is a “spiritually political society, for the exercise of the powers wherewith it is entrusted by Christ, and the due performance of the duties which He requires” (*Works*, XVI:31). This formally occurs in the Risen-Ascended Christ given gifts to men (Eph. 4:8-16). The Risen-Ascended Lord Jesus gives gifts of officers to His churches. Christ grants His power and authority, His polity, His rule, to the government and discipline of the church. The rule of the church summarizes all of these Christological distinctions (*Works*, XVI:31).

“The formal nature of it is its authority and power; its polity is skill and wisdom to act that power until its proper ends; its rule is the actual exercise of that power, according unto that skill and wisdom; its government is the exercise and application of that authority, according unto that skill, towards those that are its proper objects; it is called discipline principally with respect unto its end.”¹

What is the rule of the Church? “The exercise of the power or authority of Jesus Christ, given unto it, according unto the laws and directions prescribed by Himself, unto its edification” (*Works*, XVI:31). Jesus Christ is the King and Head of His Church, and He in His exaltation and ascension to God’s right hand has given gifts to edify and mature His church, while He rules and reigns over her at God’s right hand. Christ has given to His officers in the church a spiritual power to **rule and edify the saints of God**. The end goal of all power and authority in the church is **edification and maturity** (Eph. 4:7-16). This power is ministerial, it is a servant power and authority as our Lord Jesus has made clear (Matt. 20:25-28):

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus will not tolerate in His officers any tyrannical, magisterial, domineering power over His people, but rather through servant-humility, they are to be characterized as: “...*Not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock*” (1 Pet. 5:3). There will be no Lordship, domination, preeminence in lordly power in His church (*Works*, XVI:32-34). Christ’s officers are to minister, which consists of an “authoritative declaration and application of the commands and will of Christ unto the souls of men; wherein those who exercise it are servants unto the church for its edification, for Jesus’ sake (2 Cor. 4:5)” (*Works*, XVI:33). To introduce any kind of human authority in the church is to destroy the very nature of the Church of Christ, making it just like the kingdoms of this present age. This is why it is so important to seek to make God’s Word the foundation and central focus of study as God’s people in the Church. Christ’s officers are to seek to be experts in the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27-28), making this counsel known by the power of the Spirit, to Christ’s flock (Jer. 3:15; Zech. 4:6).

How is this power communicated from Christ to His Churches? Here Owen makes an important distinction (along with Calvin, Book IV of *Institutes* and the Westminster Confession of Faith) between the extraordinary power given to the foundational ministry of the Apostles, and the continuing, but ordinary power given to the officers building on this one foundation (Eph. 2:19-21).

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the

¹ John Owen, *Works*, XVI:31.

*whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.” - ESV
Ephesians 2:19-21*

*“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and
teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of
Christ...”^{ESV} Ephesians 4:11-12*

1. There was an extraordinary church-power committed to the Apostles as foundation of the Church. When a local church was formed by these Apostles, the churches being called and gathered by their ministry (Acts 1:14-15; 1 Cor. 3:22; Eph. 4:11-16).
2. This extraordinary power has ceased in the church. There is no longer given infallibility to church officers, or the working of miracles, the speaking in tongues, etc (see Acts 15 also for the first presbytery meeting, or regional church meeting to decide a matter through the help of the Holy Spirit through the aid of the Scriptures).
3. Christ has appointed no vicar over the church (other than the Holy Spirit as Owen will describe Him in other places).
4. All those by whom the ordinary rule of the church is to be exercised as unto their office and power is given unto the church “*not as lords of their faith, but as helpers of their joy*” (Works, XVI:34-35). All officers are but servants for Christ’s sake. “*If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all*” (Mark 9:35).
5. This whole church-power is committed unto the whole church by Christ, so that all who are called to be officers in this ordinary sense are granted authority in their office by Christ through His Word and Spirit (Works, XVI:36-37).
6. Every individual has been given power as a son of God. Wherever two or three are gathered in Christ’s name, there is right and power for mutual edification.
7. These individuals have rights and powers, but not authority. The Lord Jesus gave rights, powers, and authority to officers he has established in the church (Eph. 4:11-16). These are those whom Christ has given His special authority to rule and minister in the church.
8. The Church has the right and power to call, choose, appoint, and set apart persons who are qualified for this work of ministry (Works, XVI:37-40).
9. Members of the church are to willingly submit themselves to Christ’s officers in the church as they submit unto Christ in obedience to minister His Word.

What wisdom is necessary to shepherd Christ’s people in the Church? The wisdom given is a spiritual gift (1 Cor. 12:8). How do the elders obtain this wisdom?

1. Fervent pray for this wisdom (James 1:5).
2. Diligent study of the Scriptures (Ezra 7:10; 2 Tim. 2:1, 15) to find out and understand the rules of Christ for His Church.
3. A humble waiting upon God for answers from Scripture (Ezek. 43:11).
4. A conscientious exercise of the skill which the elders have received; “talents traded duly will increase”.

5. A continual sense of the account which is to be given of the discharge of this great trust, being called to rule in the Household of God (Heb. 13:17).

The Officers of the Church

The Church is not only an organism but also an institution with officers that Christ has entrusted to rule and shepherd in His stead by His Holy Spirit. The organizing of a church is the placing in it those officers which the Lord Jesus has appointed to act and exercise authority therein. There are two primary officers in the church: “bishops and deacons” and their work is distributed generally into two categories of “prophecy and ministry” (or, “word ministry” and “service ministry”; Phil. 1:1; Rom. 12:6-7). The distinction between bishops and deacons, or elders and deacons are only in respect to the work and order of the office. Bishops are “elders” and the elders are distinguished into two groups:

1. Those who have the authority to teach and administer the sacraments, or the “power of order” and,
2. Those who have the authority to rule is called the “power of jurisdiction” (*Works*, XVI:42-44).

Pastors and Teachers

Bishops and presbyters, or elders, are in every way the same persons, in the same office, having the same function, without distinction in order or degree (*Works*, XVI:44). In the New Testament, the qualifications and thus the office are the same for bishops, presbyters, or elders (Tit. 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). There were many bishops in one city, even in one particular church (Phil. 1:1). We are taught in Acts 20:17-28 that the Holy Spirit has made the bishops “elders”. Bishops and elders are the same (see also 1 Peter 5:1-4). There is a plurality of bishops or presbyters or elders in each church, and they shepherd the flock of God together in unity by the power of Christ’s Spirit, submitted to Holy Scripture (*Works*, XVI”44-47).

The “*first officer or elder of the church is the Pastor*” (*Works*, XVI:47; also called sometimes “Minister of the Word” in distinction from the other shepherd-elders). A pastor is the elder that feeds and rules the flock (1 Pet. 5:2; Acts 20:28), a teacher and a bishop. The name of a pastor or shepherd is metaphorical. This is the same office as bishop and elder, but focused on feeding the flock of the Great Shepherd of the Sheep (John 10:11, 14-16; Heb. 13:20). This focuses on “love, care, tenderness, watchfulness” over the flock of Christ (Eph. 4:11; Jer. 3:15).

Feeding Christ’s flock has two parts:

1. Teaching and instruction.
2. Rule or discipline. A pastor is the bishop and also the elder of the church (*Works*, XVI:47-48).
What are the most important things we should consider about a biblical pastor? Qualifications and Election/Ordination.

1. **Qualifications** (*Works*, XVI:47-51): The call of any person unto this office of pastor must possess certain qualifications given to him through Christ's Spirit (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1). There are five important qualifications a pastor must possess:
 - a. **Giftedness**: To be spiritually gifted with abilities to pastor the flock (Isa. 11:2,3; 61:1-3; Jer. 3:15; Ezek. 34:11-16; Luke 4:14; Eph. 4:7). There are spiritual powers, gifts, and abilities, required for the Gospel ministry that the Holy Spirit gives. These must be "fanned into flame" by the Holy Spirit (1 Tim. 4:11-16; 2 Tim. 1:6-7).
 - b. **Compassion**: Compassion and love to the flock. Their entrance into the pastoral office should be accompanied with love to the souls of men.
 - c. **Watchfulness**: A continual watchfulness over the whole flock, to keep it, preserve it, to feed, to lead, and cherish it, to purify and cleanse it, until it be presented unspotted to God. This watchfulness includes:
 - i. Constant **prayer** for the flock.
 - ii. **Diligence** in the application of the wisdom from God's word for each circumstance, season, and times of the state of the flock.
 - iii. Personal **admonition, exhortation, consolation, instruction**.
 - iv. All with a design to uphold the **peace and purity** of the church, and to present the sheep without blame before Jesus Christ at the Great Day.
 - d. **Zealous**: Zeal for the glory of God in his whole ministry and the execution of it.
 - e. **Christ-like**: Seeking to be Christ-like by His grace, who was described as "*holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners*" (*Works*, XVI:49-51).
2. **Election and Ordination** (*Works*, XVI:51-63): Consists of two parts:
 1. Election of the qualified man to the office.
 2. Ordination, or sacred separation by fasting and prayer.
 - a. The person is examined and seems qualified according to Biblical teaching. This is through evidence in the life of the man, as well as a trial period that he should undergo to determine his gifts to the ministry.
 - b. The person is tried and judged to be qualified, then the whole church elects the man to office.
 - c. Called by a local congregation of the church to be a pastor.
 - d. Ordained by other ordained officers to serve within Christ's Church with all formal accountability.
 - e. Owen discusses at length his Congregationalist viewpoint by assuming that Peter was given the keys to the Kingdom *as merely a member of the church*, and thus the power of calling and ordaining bishops, pastors, or elders was given to the whole church, not to the officers or the elders of the church (Owen, *Works*, XVI:63-74; I would disagree with

Owen on this point; see Bannerman, 'The Church of Christ'; 'Works of Thomas Peck'). The real disagreement in church government between the Presbyterians (of whom I would represent) and our Congregationalist brothers is summarized by Owen: "That the grant of the keys unto Peter was in the person and as the representative of the whole confessing church is the known judgment of Austin (Augustine) and a multitude of divines that follow him...Unto whom these keys are granted, they, according to their distinct interests in their grant, have the right and power of calling their bishops, pastors, or elders; for in the exercise of that trust and power it doth consist" (*Works*, XVI:63-64).²

The Special Duty of Pastors of Churches

1. **To feed the flock by the diligent preaching of the Word** (*Works*, XVI:74-76): ^{ESV} **Jeremiah 3:15** *"And I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding."* This feeding is of the essence of the office of a pastor. *"Feed my flock"* (John 21:15-17; Acts 20:28). "A man is a pastor unto them whom he feeds by pastoral teaching, and to no more; and he that doeth not so feed is no pastor" (*Works*, XVI:74-75). Pastors are to "labor in the word and doctrine". **What is required to do this faithfully?**
 - a. **Spiritual Wisdom:** Spiritual wisdom and understanding in the "mysteries of the Gospel" and the whole counsel of God in the Holy Scriptures (Acts 20:27; 1 Cor. 2:4-7; Eph. 3:8-11). The Gospel must be preached!
 - b. **Experiential Power:** Experience of the power of the truth which they preach in and upon their own souls. Without this, the pastors will be lifeless and heartless in their own work. Pastors must be experiential in their knowledge of the Gospel (Eph. 3:17-19). As Owen wrote:

"A man preaches that sermon only well unto others which preaches itself in his own soul."

² I respectfully disagree with Owen that the keys of the kingdom of heaven, or all church power has been given to all believers, or in essence the congregation, according to Matthew 16:15-19. I believe it is clear that God has given the keys to the ordained elders represented by the Apostle Peter, an elder, who then represent all the believers before God. The Presbyterian-Representative form of government seems more biblical than the congregational form (see Owen's comments on pg. 15, 63-74). I do agree with the importance of each congregation having the privilege and duty of calling their pastors and elders, and I would also object to anyone being pushed on a congregation in an overly authoritarian manner. I also see the value and wisdom in the elders of the local congregation, as well as the regional church elders (the Presbytery) to seek to gain the whole approval of the congregation for the man who will be called, and for other important ministerial matters. However, I deny that the keys of the kingdom have been placed in the hands of the congregation (1 Peter 5:1-4). If this is so, it would not only go against Sacred Scripture, but it could potentially put the congregation in the tempting place of using the keys to "lock the pastor and elders out" whenever they saw fit, as it has been said ironically and humorously.

“The lack of this experience of the power of Gospel truth on their own souls is that which gives us so many lifeless, sapless orations, quaint in words and dead as to power, instead of preaching the gospel in the demonstration of the Spirit” (Works, XVI:76).

- c. **Skill:** Skill to rightly handle the word aright (2 Tim. 2:15). Diligent attendance and study of the Word of God, principles of interpretation, etc.
 - d. **Watchfulness:** A prudent and diligent consideration of the state of the flock, both their strengths and weaknesses. An understanding and knowledge of where the flock is in their lives, seasons and circumstances, helps the pastor to guide them Scripturally, and this is particularly valuable in sermon application and counseling their souls, as well as praying specifically for them.
 - e. **Zealous:** Zeal for the glory of God and compassion for the souls of men.
2. **Continual, fervent prayer for them** (Works, XVI:77-78) (James 5:16; John 17:20; Phil. 1:4; 2 Thess. 1:11; 2 Tim. 1:3). **“We will give ourselves continually to prayer”** (Acts 6:4). “He that does constantly, diligently, fervently, pray for them, will have a testimony in himself of his own sincerity in the discharge of all other pastoral duties, nor can he voluntarily omit or neglect any of them” (Works, XVI:77). **What kinds of prayer:**
- a. The success of the Word in their hearts and lives; that they would be fruitful and glorify Christ (John 15).
 - b. Against the temptations that the church is generally exposed unto.
 - c. For the special estates and conditions and circumstances of the members of his flock.
 - d. For the special presence of Christ in the worship and fellowship of the church.
 - e. Their preservation in faith, love, and fruitfulness.
3. **Administration of the Seals of the Covenant.** The pastors are the stewards of God’s mysteries in the House of Christ (Works, XVI:79-82). The pastor is privileged to administer the Means of Grace in Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.
4. **Important Points for Pastors To Remember** (Works, XVI:82-96). A Pastor must remember:
- a. To possess a clear, sound, comprehensive knowledge of the entire doctrine of the gospel. The whole Gospel is God’s electing love from eternity past, and the hope and glory to be revealed in the believer’s life in this present age, and in the age to come.
 - b. To have a love of the truth. To know the truth, to seek the truth, to let the truth search him, to speak the truth in love in all situations.
 - c. To have a conscientious care and fear of giving countenance or encouragement unto novel opinions.
 - d. To possess learning and ability of mind to discern and disprove the oppositions of adversaries.
 - e. To watch over their own flocks constantly.

- f. To have a fellowship and accountability of a concurrent assistance with the elders and preachers of other churches with whom they are in communion.
- g. To labor for the conversion of souls both within and without the congregation.
- h. To excel in readiness, willingness, ability to comfort, relieve, and refresh those who are tempted, tossed, and wearied with fears and troubles.
- i. To have a compassionate suffering with all the members of the church in all their trials and troubles.
- j. To visit the sick and care for the poor.
- k. To seek communion with other churches of the same faith and profession.
- l. To possess a humble, holy, exemplary conversation in all godliness and honesty.

The Office of Teachers in the Church

The Lord Jesus has given unto his church “*pastors and teachers*” (Eph. 4:11). Who are called by this name in the Scriptures? This has been disputed, and there has never been uniform agreement about who the teachers are. There are four opinions concerning those called “teachers” (*Works*, XVI:98-106):

1. No office denoted by it, just a general way to refer to those who taught others. Owen disagrees with this.
2. Some say another name for the same office of pastor. There are examples of this in the early church. The Bible says “pastors and teachers” not “pastors or teachers”, but it seems that “teachers” refers to another office distinct from pastors.
3. A distinct office focused on instruction and catechism only but not ruling or administering, nor administering the sacraments as pastors and elders. A practice in the early church yet Owen dismisses the third opinion until further consideration.
4. A distinct office of the same nature and kind as the pastor, but different in focus because of the particular gifts that are given. This is the one Owen affirms as the scriptural meaning (and I believe agrees with the teaching of John Calvin, see *Institutes*, Book IV).
 - a. They are joined with pastors in the same order, as their associates in office in Eph. 4:11; they are with the prophets, and set in the church as they are (1 Cor. 12:28; Acts 13:1).
 - b. They have a peculiar work, of the same general nature with that of pastors, assigned to them (Rom. 12:7). They are to teach or preach the Gospel by virtue of office, they have the same office in substance with pastors. The main difference between the pastor and teacher is their gifts given to them by the Lord.

Of the Rule of the Church, or Of Ruling Elders

The rule and government of the church, or the execution of the authority of Christ therein, is in the hand of the elders (*Works*, XVI:106-130). No one in the church has rule but the elders (1 Pet. 5:1; 1 Jo. 1;

3 Jo. 1; Acts 21:18; 1 Tim. 5:17). The elders have been granted the stewardship of Christ's "keys to the kingdom" (Matt. 16:19). The keys refer to two important truths:

1) Key of Order

2) Key of Jurisdiction

The "**Key of Order**" is the "spiritual right, power and authority of bishops or pastors to preach the word, administer the sacraments, and doctrinally to bind and loose the consciences of men". The "**Key of Jurisdiction**" is the right, government, or discipline of the church" (*Works*, XVI:106).

All church-rulers by institution are elders; to be an elder of the church and a ruler in it is all one. Although the pastors and elders both are elders and hold the Key of Order and the Key of Jurisdiction, what are the distinctions between pastors and elders?

1. The work and duty of rule in the church is distinct from the work and duty of pastoral feeding by the preaching of the word and administration of the sacraments.
2. Different and distinct gifts are required unto the discharge of these distinct works and duties (Eph. 4:7; 1 Cor. 12:4, 7-10; Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Pet. 4:10).
3. There are differing gifts because of the different works of pastoral teaching on the one hand, and the practical rule on the other (although elders will also be able to teach, 1 Tim. 3:2 as part of his qualifications); this is true from 1. The light of reason, and 2. From experience. Some men are fitted by gifts for the dispensation of the word and doctrine in a way of pastoral feeding who have no useful ability for the work of rule, and some are fitted for rule who have no gifts for the discharge of the pastoral work in preaching; "yea, it is very seldom that both these sorts of gifts do concur in any eminency in the same person, or without some notable defect" (*Works*, XVI:109).
4. The work of rule, as distinct from teaching, is in general to watch over the walking or conversation of the members of the church with authority, exhorting, comforting, admonishing, reproofing, encouraging, directing of them, as occasion shall require. The pastoral work is primarily to "declare the whole counsel of God" to "divine the word aright" or to "labor in the word and doctrine" (*Works*, XVI:109).

The Holy Spirit has distinguished this office of elders into two sorts, those called to teaching and rule, and those who are called to rule alone (1 Tim. 5:17). There ought to be elders in every church; the whole rule of the church is entrusted to them; there are elders who labor in the word and doctrine, and those who rule only (*Works*, XVI:117).

The Nature of Church Polity or Rule, with the Duty of Elders

There is a power, authority and rule, granted unto and residing in some persons of the church, and not in the body of the fraternity or community of the people (*Works*, XVI:130-143).

What is the skill and polity that are required unto the exercise or administration of the government of the church?

The polity of church-government, subjectively considered, is a spiritual wisdom and understanding in the law of Christ, with an ability to make application of it in different instances and circumstances for the edification of the church.

What is the sole law and rule of it?

The sole rule and measure of the government of the church is the **Law of Christ**. The declaration of His mind and will in his institutions, commands, prohibitions, and promises. The rule and law of the exercise of power in the elders of the church is the **Holy Scriptures only**.

What are the acts and duties of it, especially those wherein the office of ruling elders does take place?

An ability of mind to make application of the Law of Christ to different situations and circumstances. One of the reasons why the Lord Christ appointed many elders in each church was so that all the elders, in their variety of gifts, could be helpful to one another in the common work that they are called unto. The Lord has committed His power and authority to the elders in order to represent the holiness, love, compassion, care, and authority of Christ towards His church. The specific acts and duties include:

1. The admission and exclusion of members to the church.
2. The direction of the church, in all the members of it, unto the observance of the rule and law of Christ in all things, unto His glory; specifically, to have:
 - a. Mutual, intense, peculiar love among themselves, to be continually exercised in all the duties.
 - b. Personal holiness, in gracious and moral obedience.
 - c. Usefulness toward the members of the same church, towards other churches, and all men absolutely, as occasion and opportunity do require.
 - d. The due performance of all those duties which all the members of the church owe mutually unto each other.

What are the specific duties or ruling elders?

1. **Concern for the Life of the Church:** To watch diligently over the ways, the walking, and conversation of all the members of the church, to see that it be blameless, without offense, exemplary, and in all things answering the holiness of the commands of Christ.
2. **Concern for the Peace and Purity of the Church:** To watch against all risings or appearances of such differences and divisions that would upset the peace and purity of the church.
3. **Concern to Equip the Saints for Works of Ministry (Eph. 4:13-16):** Warn and admonish all the members of the church of their special duties according to their gifts of grace so that they be not negligent or wanting in them.
4. **Concern for Order:** To watch against the beginnings of any church disorders (1 Cor. 14:40).
5. **Concern for the Weak and Afflicted:** To visit the sick, especially those who are in trials and cannot attend public worship services. Visit the imprisoned.
6. **Concern for Diaconate:** Advise and give direction unto the deacons of the church.

7. **Concern for the Doctrine and Ministry of the Word:** Meet and consult with the teaching elders about such things of importance as are to be proposed in and unto the church, for consent and compliance.
8. **Concern to Administer Discipline if Necessary:** To preserve the church in peace and unity.

Of Deacons

Jesus says: *“The poor always ye have with you”* (John 12:8). The deacons are servants who free up the ministry of the word so that the pastor can focus on preaching of the Gospel and give himself constantly to prayer (Acts 6:4).

What is required in the office of deacon? “The office and work of the deacons is to excite, direct, and help [church members] in the exercise of that grace and discharge of the duty therein incumbent on them” (*Works*, XVI: 146). The office of deacon is an office of service, which gives not any authority or power in the rule of the church, but being an office, it gives authority with respect unto the special work of it. The reason for the institution of this office was to free the pastors of the churches who labor in the word and doctrine from avocations by outward things, and manage not only gifts and helps to the poor, but the maintenance and management of all other similar business of the church. Three things of the deacon in the local congregation:

1. The love, charity, bounty, and benevolence of the members of the church, in contribution unto that ministry.
2. The care and oversight of the discharge of it.
3. The actual exercise and application of it.

Of Excommunication

The power of the church towards its members includes three points: 1. Admission of members into its society; 2. The rule and edification of them that belong unto it; 3. The exclusion out of its society of such as obstinately refuse to live and walk according unto the laws and rules of it (*Works*, XVI:151).

Excommunication causes many Christians to disagree, and there are many misunderstandings about it. In our day, it is seldom practiced by evangelical churches (Owen said this in the 17th century!! How much more today...!). Excommunication has been not only overlooked but also has been abused by those who misunderstand, and/or abuse church authority and power.

Men can freely consent to join a local congregation, but they are bound to submit to the teaching of Jesus Christ as He has revealed His will in the Scriptures. We must understand excommunication as an act of authority that is exercised by the church (1 Cor. 5:4). The privileges of church membership men are excluded from by excommunication. Excommunication is a use of the keys of the Kingdom that has been granted by King Jesus to His officers.

1. Distinct from using the Keys of the Kingdom in preaching, that is doctrinal and declarative, excommunication is disciplinary because members of the church have sinned against God and have refused to submit in doctrine and life to their elders.
2. Christ instituted the discipline of excommunication in Matthew 18:15-20.
3. The Apostles and the early church practice excommunication (Acts 13:13, 20-23; 1 Cor. 5:1-7).
4. What is excommunication? It is an act of church authority.
 - a. The cause of it is a scandalous sin that is unrepented of.
 - b. The preparation for its execution, which is the church's sense of the sin and scandal, with humiliation for it.
 - c. The warranty of it, which is the institution of Christ, wherein his authority is engaged.
 - d. The manner and form of it, by an act of authority, with the consent of the whole church.
 - e. The effect of it, in a total separation from the privileges of the church.
 - f. The end of it, in two ways:
 - i. With respect unto the church: its purging of sin and vindication.
 - ii. With respect unto the person excommunicated, his repentance, reformation, and salvation (*Works*, XVII:160-161).
 - g. Who can be excommunicated? Members of the church by which the sentence is to be denounced against them. Those church members that may be justly excommunicated such as continue obstinate in the practice of any scandalous sin after private and public admonition (*Works*, XVI:167-182).

Of the Communion of Churches

It should be reminded that the churches of the Reformation were not churches seeking to start over again, but were churches seeking to return "ad fontes" to the foundational, "catholic"/universal church of the Lord Jesus Christ of the Church Fathers (see Calvin's preface to King Francis I in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*). Reformed Churches seek to stress the "catholicity" of Christ's Church; we are formally "Reformed Catholics" (without intending any provocation).

Churches of like mind ought to hold communion among themselves for the edification of the body of Christ, or the church catholic. This is seeking to fulfill the prayer of Jesus that we all be one as He and the Father are one; we know that we are united by one Spirit and have "*koinonia*" or communion one with another (Phil. 2:1-5; John 17). While each congregation, and denomination (as we would call them today) have their specific gifts and strengths, nevertheless, we should seek to be unified as much as possible, remembering we are part of "one, holy, apostolic, and catholic (universal) church."

We have union in Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:15-16; Col. 2:19) and this union should be further, more intimately realized, for the glory of God, to be a light to the nations. How will the world know the love of Christ? That His people seek to love one another. In the Spirit, all believers already hold union with each other. The Apostle Paul could say that he was truly with the congregations "in spirit" though he was not with them in the body.

How can we better seek unity and communion of churches? We should understand that “the communion of churches is their joint actings in the same gospel duties towards God in Christ, with their mutual actings towards each other with respect unto that end of their institution and being, which is the glory of Christ in the edification of the whole catholic church” (*Works*, XVI:191). Communion can be held in these specific ways:

1. **Confessional:** In the belief of the same doctrine of truth. This is to put into print specifically what we confess as a particular congregation and local body of believers. This helps others (and the world) know what we believe, what we emphasize, how we differ from other denominations and heretics.
2. **Christology:** We believe that Christ has always had a faithful body of believers on earth, of which we can join and be a part of. The church is redeemed and sanctified in him, although not yet complete. ***“We believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church...”***
3. **Prayer:** We all access the Father in Christ by one Spirit (Eph. 2:18). We can pray for one another throughout the world, no matter how far apart we are in actual, geographical distance. We have the same Spirit and the Same High Priest at God’s Right Hand, the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of His one Church.
4. **Sacramental:** We have communion and unity of faith in our practices of baptism and the Lord’s Supper though our modes and administrations may differ, the significance is the same.
5. **Regal:** All churches profess a subjection unto the authority of Christ in all things. We are all one body, united to the Head, who wears the Golden and Glorious Crown, and sits at God’s right hand!

The bond of our union is the love of God in Christ Jesus for us, and for one another. We love the brethren, and so we want to recognize that common communion in Christ that we all share. Synods are the meetings of congregations and churches for the purposes of sharing communion, and deciding matters together as the people of God. The end of all particular churches is the glory of God through the one Church in Christ Jesus. We see the unity, communion and wisdom of synods in Acts 15 where an important matter of the early church is decided to help the local congregations. We see delegates from the local congregations sent to decide a matter that concerns the whole body, or universal communion of Christ’s flock.

Let us seek to put these things into practice by God’s grace, and through the power of His Spirit in Christ. Thanks be to God the Father for wisely initiating this Great Salvation in His Beloved Son, and for providing us by His Spirit a glorious fellowship and communion of believers for our edification and encouragement and maturity in Christ! Glory to His Name!

***“For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever.
Amen.”***

- ^{ESV} **Romans 11:36**