

A Call for Reclaiming Church Government

GERALD R. THOMPSON



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A Call for Reclaiming Church Government

A declaration of individual rights and of limitations on ecclesiastical authority for the reclamation of the Church on behalf of all believers:

[TRUE: Religious authority is like civil authority: no one in the Church has authority to rule over others except by consent as a mere agent for a limited purpose; no religious institution is superior to the individual, family or civil institutions; and the people always retain the right to alter or abolish any religious association. In addition, no one can claim a divine appointment to lead the Church (no divine right of leadership) nor a right to position themselves between God and the people (no priesthood).]

[FALSE: Religious authority to rule others comes directly from God; religious authority operates under a different set of rules than other forms of authority; the Church is superior to other human institutions; that any religious association and the universal Church are one and the same; that God has appointed any spiritual rulers or a priesthood among men; and that a group of believers have any more religious authority than any believer has in an individual capacity.]

Religious Authority

1. The duty to worship God (to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength) is the responsibility of every individual. Therefore, the authority and jurisdiction to worship God belongs to each individual, not to any group or corporate body. There is no right or duty of corporate worship.
2. Religious freedom is the right of every individual, which right flows from the duty and authority each individual receives from God. Religious freedom is by definition an individual right, not a group or corporate right.
3. The authority of the Church is given to every individual believer - not to any group or subset of believers, nor to any leadership or hierarchy among believers. All Church authority is vested completely in every individual believer.
4. Every believer is accountable solely to God and not to any man or group of men for the worship of God, the exercise of religious freedom, and the exercise of Church authority.
5. Believers may cooperate together in worship and the exercise of religious freedom if they wish, but this adds nothing to the validity or sanctity of the worship. A believer is not required to meet or associate with others to worship God or have his religious rights recognized.
6. All believers are, and of right ought to be recognized as, equal under the laws of God and man.

No law may recognize any difference in religious status, rights or authority as between one believer and another.

7. There is no religious authority which any church leader may claim, which does not also belong of right to every individual believer. No particular persons designated as clergy or otherwise, has any religious authority whatsoever which is not also shared in equal measure by every other individual believer.
8. An individual does not have to go through anyone else to get access to God. An individual does not need anyone's permission to become a believer and cannot be made an unbeliever by another's will.

Organizational Authority

9. Since Christ is the head of the Church, by definition there is no human head of the Church. All church authority on earth is of necessity decentralized and a matter of local organization as each locality sees fit, subject only to such restrictions as apply to all believers universally. No man or group of men stands in the place of Christ to rule the visible Church.
10. An individual does not need anyone's approval to organize an independent church association.
11. There is no command of God that anyone must associate with any particular group of believers, or refrain from associating with the same.
12. No group of people can possess any greater right or authority than what is possessed by each member individually. No group of believers can possess any religious or ecclesiastical authority whatsoever which is not also possessed by every individual believer.
13. All ecclesiastical authority is derivative and delegated, not original or inherent. All such authority is bottom-up, not top-down, that is, derived from and through the consent of believers in voluntary association with each other, not directly from any divine source.
14. Accountability runs to the source from which authority is derived. Accordingly, all church leaders are accountable to the association of believers from which their authority is derived. Further, as no ecclesiastical authority proceeds directly from any divine source, no church association leaders may avoid associational accountability by claiming to be accountable exclusively to God.
15. No one is born into a church association. All churches are by nature voluntary associations which are independent of the universal body of Christ.
16. No association of believers is any more or less a part of the universal body of Christ than any other association of believers. No church association is divinely instituted, as all church

associations are created by men.

17. No church association may rightly claim to be the exclusive representation of the body of Christ or the only true church. All church associations are equal before God and the law.

Ecclesiastical Polity

18. While believers are commended not to avoid fellowship with other believers, the time, place and manner of such fellowship is within the discretion of each individual believer and not subject to any universal rule. The sanctity and validity of informal or *ad hoc* associations is the same as any formalized or organized associations of believers.
19. God nowhere commands believers to participate in any particular church association or group of believers, formal or informal. Believers do not need to meet under the auspices, or with the permission, of clergy or any other person as a means of fulfilling the divine commendation to fellowship with other believers.
20. God authorizes believers to associate together and to form local church associations, but he never established any particular form of church association, nor did he appoint any particular people as leaders of those associations.
21. While God appoints various offices in the invisible church, this vests no one with authority in any church association. God does not appoint any person to any office in a church association, and no one has any inherent or divine authority to rule over, lead, or shepherd any church association.
22. Every voluntary association has the right to expel (dissociate, or excommunicate) its own members. However, no man or group of men has the authority to excommunicate anyone from the invisible Church, to revoke one's pardon from sin, or to condemn anyone to eternal judgment.
23. Membership in the invisible Church is not conditioned upon, nor is it obtained by, joining any church association.
24. No man or group of men may, in the name of God or the Church, claim to be subject to that jurisdiction to the exclusion of all other jurisdictions. There is no such thing as a holy man, holy orders, or a holy church, which is wholly exempt from the lawful jurisdiction of individuals, families, and civil governments.
25. The scope of authority voluntarily delegated by believers to their ecclesiastical leaders is limited. Believers in association with each other always retain the inalienable right (acting by mutual consent) to alter or abolish any ecclesiastical organization, which right cannot be restrained or denied by church leaders. Church leaders have no right or authority to maintain

their positions of leadership apart from the consent of believers in association with each other.

26. Outside the context of any formal church association, each individual believer retains the inalienable right to worship God, to exercise religious freedom, and to exercise the full scope of authority delegated to the Church, which right cannot be restrained or denied.

Sacerdotal Authority

27. Since Jesus is the sole mediator between God and men, of necessity there is no human mediator between God and men. All religious or sacramental authority is of necessity decentralized and equally distributed to all believers.
28. The authority to baptize believers belongs to every believer and may be exercised independently of any church association. God has given no one any exclusive, primary or special authority to baptize others, and the authority to baptize is individual, not corporate.
29. Since God has not prescribed the time, place, or manner of observing believer's baptism, the time, place, and manner of its observance is left to the discretion of each individual believer, who is accountable solely to God and not to any church association for its exercise. It is not the place of any church association to second-guess the sufficiency of the manner in which any believer was baptized, or to require that any believer be re-baptized in a different manner.
30. Infant baptism is a practice by which children who have no capacity to assent to the New Covenant nor to membership in any church association are ostensibly inducted as members of the visible and/or invisible church, violating God's law of voluntary associations.
31. The authority to administer and receive communion (or the Lord's Supper) belongs to every believer and may be exercised independently of any church association. God has given no one any exclusive, primary or special authority to administer communion, and the authority to administer or receive communion is individual, not corporate.
32. Since God has not prescribed the time, place, manner or frequency of observing communion, the time, place, manner and frequency of its observance is left to the discretion of each individual believer, who is accountable solely to God and not to any church association for its exercise.
33. The practice of confession between believers is solely for the purpose of mutual edification, not for obtaining redemption. No believer or church association has the authority to absolve or forgive sins, either during life or after death, which is an authority reserved to God alone.
34. Anointing of the sick may be administered by any believer at any time, can be exercised independently of any church association, and requires no one else's permission.

35. There is no such thing as a holy object or a sacred place. No physical structure may properly be called a temple (the dwelling place of God) or a house of God. The persistent recognition of holy objects and sacred places, and the pervasive use of temple terminology, among church associations is unauthorized and shameful.

Clergy and Priesthood

36. No one but God can institute or create a religious priesthood, as such authority has never been delegated to men. However, God forever abolished the only human priesthood he ever established and he has not established any other since then.
37. All efforts to institute, or re-introduce, a priesthood among men are lawless and subversive of true religion. All religious priesthoods are abolished as a matter of God's law. There is no such thing as a Christian priesthood, and there never was.
38. There is a universal priesthood among all believers which vests no one with any greater or lesser authority than that obtained by every individual believer. Any claim to special religious authority by any man or group of men is a fraud and unlawful. No minister, pastor, priest or preacher may rightfully claim any authority, right, duty, privilege, benefit or standing which is not also shared in equal measure by every individual believer.
39. There is no such thing as a distinction between clergy and laity in the Church, and everywhere such a distinction is asserted it is a fraud and unlawful. The body of the Church - visible and invisible - is composed of many members who each stands in equal relation to the head. All Church members are equal to each other, that there should be no division in the body.
40. There are offices in the visible and invisible Church, but none of these are of a higher calling than any other office in the Church, none are given as full-time ministry more than the others, none carry a greater authority to rule or to lead than the others, and none are inherently worthy of greater honor or compensation than other Church offices.
41. Even when ministers are not called priests formally, whenever a church association sets aside religious functions that only certain people may perform, religious titles that only certain people may have, clothes that only certain people may wear, implements or articles that only certain people may use, or designates places where only certain people may go, the result is the creation of a *de facto* priesthood.
42. The practice of ordination, by which certain believers are set apart from other believers to perform the work of any church association as a matter of vocation (*i.e.*, full-time occupation, earning of livelihood), results in the creation of a *de facto* priesthood.
43. The practice by which clergy are recognized as members of an ecclesiastical body separate from the regular body of church members (such as a presbytery or diocese, or any other body

composed solely of members of the clergy) results in the creation of a *de facto* priesthood.

44. The practice by which clergy are afforded certain civil privileges and benefits not extended to all believers universally, such as tax free housing allowances, exemptions from social security, and other tax and legal privileges, results in the creation of a *de facto* priesthood.

Tithes and Offerings

45. The tithes were instituted as a necessary component of the Levitical priesthood of ancient Israel. When that priesthood was abolished, the tithes were necessarily abolished as well. No analog to the tithes was ever instituted with respect to the Church by its founder.
46. The bases for the tithes - a hereditary priesthood and the incapacity of priests to own land - have no parallel in the Church. The practice of admonishing believers to tithe in obedience to a supposed command of God to support the clergy or maintain holy places is abhorrent. There is no lawful basis for tithing in the Church.
47. The work of the Church is funded by voluntary contributions. The practice by which believers are told to contribute (as a fulfillment of their duty to God) a stated percentage of increase, gross or net income, or a percentage of assets to the Church results in the creation of a *de facto* tithes (and of necessity, a *de facto* priesthood).
48. The practice by which believers are told to direct their contributions (as a fulfillment of their duty to God) for the work of the organized Church first, primarily or exclusively to the clergy, to the local church or parish, or to particular denominations or religious institutions results in the creation of a *de facto* tithes (and of necessity, a *de facto* priesthood).
49. The use of the term "offering" to refer to a contribution or donation is a deliberate misnomer. The term "offering" is a specific reference to the sacrificial system which was part and parcel of the Levitical priesthood, and which has therefore been abolished. The use of the term "offering" is a veiled re-introduction of a *de facto* priesthood.
50. A laborer is worthy of his hire, but that applies to all laborers, not just some, nor some laborers (*i.e.*, clergy) more than others (non-clergy). God never established that pastors or any other offices in the Church ought to be full-time or paid positions, or that other offices ought to be part-time, subordinate, or volunteer positions. Compensation is based on contract (mutual consent), not spiritual office (divine authority).
51. There are no first fruits entitlements in the Church. There is no rule that the first or most contributions of a believer should go to or through the Church. There is no rule that contributions "to the Lord" must go to or through any church association.
52. Contributions to the Church historically (as exemplified in scripture) were for members, not

leaders. Leaders were not entitled to a predetermined cut, a percentage, or an administrative fee. The compensation of church leaders was based on agreement, not entitlement.

53. Direct contributions to individual believers by other believers are a valid and desirable form of church contribution. God never set up any church association as a funneling organization for believers' contributions, though believers may voluntarily pool contributions if desired. Church membership does not obligate any member to make contributions to the local body, to pool contributions with other believers, or to subject any donations to the control of others.
54. Laws which grant tax deductibility for contributions to recognized churches make distinctions between formal and informal churches, between clergy and laity, and between individual believers and organized groups of believers, all in violation of the law of equality and the law of religious liberty.
55. Church associations which advocate for the retention of special tax breaks for recognized churches concede an unwarranted jurisdiction to the civil state, perpetuate the unlawful clergy/laity distinction and a *de facto* priesthood, disparage the religious rights of individual believers, and trample the laws of God concerning equality underfoot.

Church and the Individual

56. It is the responsibility of the Church to equip and build up believers. To the extent church associations have not equipped their members universally and individually to exercise the authority of the Church, or alternatively, have equipped some of their members to exercise authority God has not delegated to any believer, they have failed in their duty to equip believers and have undermined the ability of their members to exercise Church authority.
57. The failure of the Church to equip believers to govern themselves in carrying out God's commands breeds an unhealthy reliance on the clergy, who thereby empower themselves to master, rather than serve, the Church.
58. No church association has authority to direct what education an individual should receive or what occupation an individual should engage in against the will of any adult person or the parents of any minor child. Believers who voluntarily join a church association do not thereby give up any of their individual or familial sovereignty.
59. No church association or church leader has authority to superintend or direct the moral, religious, legal, personal or familial decisions of any believer, even if voluntarily surrendered. Any practice of discipleship by which a believer yields his will to the will of another is a usurpation of the God-given right of self-government. All believers stand in equal relation to God and no believer needs the "covering" of another believer to have full access to God.
60. Not only are all believers equal before God, but so are all vocations. Vocational service to any

church association or religious organization is not a higher calling than any other vocational service. "Going into the ministry" is an oxymoron - no vocation is inherently more or less ministerial than any other.

61. God makes no spiritual distinctions between believers in the choice of a lawful profession or occupation. There is no such thing as "sacred" employment or "secular" employment. All lawful employments or vocations are equally pleasing to God.
62. The fact that any believer chooses to engage in "full-time ministry" does not impose an obligation on any other believer to encourage or support (financially or otherwise) that choice of vocations. When a church association celebrates a believer's decision to engage in a religious vocation but does not similarly celebrate the decisions of believers to engage in other vocations, it tramples underfoot the command of God to take dominion over the earth.
63. The practice of asceticism, and especially the use of the vow of poverty, is contrary to God's mandate that all men should take dominion over the earth. Further, the vow of poverty historically has been a pretense for depriving familial heirs in favor of organized religion, enriching the clergy and frustrating God's laws of property and inheritance.

Church and the Family

64. Marriage and the family institution are established by God, but this does not make marriage a religious rite, sacrament, ordinance or function. The authority to marry is vested in every person directly by God as a natural right, to the believer and unbeliever alike, without passing through the instrumentality of the Church.
65. The law of marriage was given to all mankind, not exclusively, primarily or in any special sense to believers. The term, "a Christian marriage" may describe the beliefs of a husband and wife, but is otherwise an oxymoron, as any lawful marriage between two people, whether either of them is a believer or not, is acceptable in the sight of God.
66. God never gave any authority over marriage or the family to the Church. Marriage and the family exist independently of the visible and invisible Church, and are in no way subject to church jurisdiction. All pretended authority over marriage asserted by church associations throughout history is a wrongful usurpation.
67. No church has the authority to dictate when or who anyone should marry. No couple needs the permission, authorization or blessing of the Church to enter into marriage. A couple may request the blessing or recognition of their marriage by a church association if they wish, but it adds nothing to the union and does not operate to distinguish their marriage from any other.
68. Two persons of the same sex do not meet the minimum legal requirements to be married. No church association has authority to bless or recognize a civil union or any other pseudo-marital

relationship between two members of the same sex.

69. No church association has authority to grant a divorce.
70. No church association has authority to grant an annulment. The practice of some church associations to grant annulments after a marriage has been consummated (and often after children have been born of the union) is unlawful and abhorrent. Let no man separate what God has joined together.
71. While there is no rule that every individual must marry, the coordinated effort of any church association to encourage individual celibacy as a means of obtaining God's favor, or to make celibacy a requirement for vocational service in that church association, is a denigration of marriage and the family institution.
72. There is no inherent conflict between marriage and service to God or the Church, and to say otherwise is repugnant to the law of God.
73. The desire to enjoy a reputation of virginity among persons in so-called holy orders has historically lead to the practice of secret immorality to the shame of the Church. Specifically, the historic legacy of institutionalized celibacy among church associations is the promotion of infidelity, adultery, homosexuality, child sacrifice, pedophilia and prostitution.
74. Infant baptism and infant dedication are but additional means whereby a church association asserts an unwarranted jurisdiction over the family institution. The authority to have and raise children is vested in every family directly by God as a natural right, to the believer and unbeliever alike. Parents may request the blessing or recognition of their children by a church association if they wish, but it adds nothing to the family and does not operate to distinguish their children from other children, making it a pointless exercise which should not be encouraged.
75. It is a precept of God that a believer should call no man his spiritual father, for God alone is such. The common use of "father" to refer to a member of the clergy violates this rule. While it is permissible to refer to fellow believers as spiritual brothers or sisters, yet the use of these terms to refer primarily to persons in so-called holy orders or any special class of believers is inappropriate.
76. The use of familial terms to refer to persons engaged in vocational service to a church association denigrates the family institution as it purports to substitute a mere religious association for an actual family and thereby mischaracterizes the true relationship of the parties to each other. Similarly, it is improper to refer to any person in vocational service to the Church as being married to Christ in a way which differs from the relationship between Christ and every other believer.

Church and Civil Government

77. Neither the invisible Church nor any church association has authority to exercise force or coercion, to punish crimes, or to wage physical or temporal war. A Church association may punish offenses against God, religion or the Church solely by means of dissociation without adding any temporal punishment. Such dissociation has no impact on a person's membership in the invisible Church whatsoever.
78. No church association has authority to exercise any other civil powers, such as levying fines or taxes, adopting rules which bind the conduct of its members, or regulating the familial, economic or personal affairs of its members.
79. It is both proper and necessary that civil laws recognize what religion is and is not, in order for religious liberty to be protected. Religion is objectively defined in the laws of nature and nature's God to be a part of those duties and jurisdictions for which an account is owed solely to God, not to any man or group of men. Therefore, society must know what these things are, so as not to usurp or infringe them.
80. It is factually impossible for society to determine which persons are true believers and which persons are not, because no man can actually know the heart of another. It is legally impermissible for civil laws to determine which persons are true believers and which persons are not, because society lacks any jurisdiction over either the heart or the mind of individuals. To make a legal determination of spiritual status is the very essence of tyranny. Hence, there can be no legal authority to recognize or define the invisible Church.
81. A church association (*i.e.*, the visible church), therefore, can never have any legal status which differs from that of any other voluntary association. To confer any special legal status on a church is to make a distinction based on religion or spiritual condition, a distinction which is absolutely prohibited in law. Further, implicit in any such determination is the assumption that a group of believers have a legal status which differs from the legal status of each member in his individual capacity, an assumption which is absolutely false.
82. The view held by the vast majority of churches and legal advocates for religious freedom is that religion is subjectively defined (meaning civil laws cannot say what religion is or isn't), but it is both proper and necessary to define what a church is and to accord special legal status to churches and church leaders as a result. In other words, the modern religious perspective has things exactly backwards.
83. The protections of the law of religious liberty are of necessity directed equally to every individual, not to religious institutions. No law may recognize any difference in religious status, rights or authority as between one believer and a group of believers, between different groups of believers, or as between believers and non-believers.

84. No law may confer special benefits, exemptions or privileges on some or all believers or citizens because of their religious opinions, callings or offices. In other words, no law may define, recognize, or confer any privilege or benefit upon members of the clergy, or in any other way recognize a clergy-laity distinction. Either the law of religious liberty applies to all individuals equally, or it is meaningless.
85. All legal exemptions or special benefits conferred on church associations are unlawful. All legal exemptions or special benefits conferred on members of the clergy or the employees of any church association are unlawful.
86. The gospel is supposed to bring liberty, but the example of modern churches is tyranny. The vast majority of church associations assert a top-down authority which does not exist, assert a jurisdiction over matters which God has given to others, directly or indirectly support the existence of an unlawful priesthood, and advocate for a special legal status to which they are not entitled. The result is that instead of equipping their members for spiritual self-government, they are raising a flock of sheep fit only for slavery.

Churches and the Law

87. No man or group of men can say or do anything which alters the laws of God.
88. There is but one law of God for all of mankind. God does not have one set of laws for believers and another set of laws for unbelievers, nor does he now make legal distinctions on the basis of nationality, ethnicity, race or religion.
89. Nothing in the life, death or ministry of Christ altered or repealed any part of the law of nature. Nothing in the life, death or ministry of Christ altered or repealed any part of the divine covenants delivered to Adam, Noah, Abraham or David. The divine covenants delivered to Adam and Noah are still binding on all people and nations today.
90. The gospel does not trump, dispel or replace the laws of nature or the universal laws of nature's God. There is no conflict whatsoever between the laws of nature and the universal laws of nature's God on the one hand, and the grace of God on the other hand.
91. It is not proper to speak of any of the commands of Christ as ordinances. Christ did not come in a legislative capacity. The commands of Christ are executive in nature, that is, carrying out God's pre-existing law.
92. Nothing in the life, death or ministry of Christ made any part of the laws of ancient Israel (including the Ten Commandments and the Mosaic covenant) applicable to the Church. To the extent any of those laws are binding on gentile nations today, they must be independently found to be a part of the universal law of nature.

93. None of the apostles or biblical writers of the New Testament had any legislative authority whereby they could create a completely new rule binding on all believers.
94. It is not proper to speak of either baptism or the observation of communion (the Lord's supper) as an ordinance. There is only a general delegation of authority to each individual believer to observe such things in his discretion. There is no prescription or regulation of the time, place or manner for observing either baptism or communion, as these are fully within the liberty and discretion of each individual believer to decide.
95. The divine or revealed laws of God are generally not to be found in so-called "approved examples" from scripture or the conduct of the early church. When God wants to promulgate a rule subsequent to the creation (*i.e.*, the law of nature), he either does it in the form of a divine covenant, or he announces his intention to legislate. He does not leave the matter to implication, but knows how to use rule-making language ("this shall be a statute," etc.) and is perfectly capable of disclosing his intention to act as Lawgiver.
96. The so-called "regulative principle of worship" is a misguided attempt to infer a series of rules which amount to a form of ceremonial law for the Church, when God clearly abolished the only ceremonial law he ever established (namely, the Mosaic ceremonial law), and he never disclosed an intention to institute a new ceremonial law. An inevitable tendency of the regulative principle of worship is the re-institution of a *de facto* priesthood.
97. The purpose of all of God's law is not to be a tutor to lead us to Christ. That may have been the purpose of the Mosaic sacrificial law. But the Mosaic sacrificial law is not all law. The laws of nature and nature's God are much more comprehensive than the Mosaic sacrificial law. God's law is not exclusively, or even chiefly, concerned with redemptive theology.
98. The Church is not the highest, penultimate or preeminent institution given to mankind. The Church is merely equal with the divinely created institutions of the individual, the family and nations. Further, every church association is merely equal with other voluntary associations.
99. Any church association which continually operates in defiance of God's law (*i.e.*, has a history of repeated abuses and usurpations from which it does not desist) should be altered or abolished. All *de facto* priesthoods are unlawful and should be abolished.
100. To the extent people engage in any of the unauthorized activities described herein, notwithstanding any purity of motivations or good intentions to the contrary, they violate the laws of God, subvert the gospel, and bring a reproach on the name and finished work of Christ.

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