

19) The Church, Part 2

How is authority established in decision-making, visioning and guiding within the church? Here there is wide diversity within the churches of Christendom.

1) On the one end of the spectrum are Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. They are marked by a top-down hierarchical structure beginning with the pope or patriarch at the top, down to cardinals, archbishops, bishops, and then local priests across local parishes and congregations. The authority flows from the top downwards.

2) Then there are the “mainline” Protestant churches that emerged out of the Protestant Reformation, which was a breakaway from the Roman Catholic church across Europe in the 16th century. These are the Lutheran Church and the Reformed Church which was called Presbyterian in Scotland. Under the Reformed branch are several other churches with names such as: “United” or “Uniting” churches, “Christian Reformed” churches, and Reformed churches called “Evangelical” in Europe (very different than “Evangelical” churches in the U.S. and Canada). Reformed churches are marked by a balance between a) the authority of a clergy class within a larger governing structure represented by all churches within a geographical region, and b) the democratic will of the people within each congregation also represented within the larger governing bodies by lay people. God speaks through all people and in the fellowship of all persons together rather than to a hierarchy in charge. Also, a balance of clergy and lay at all levels of church governance ensures the interests and wisdom of all church members are represented.

Anglican or Episcopalian (in the U.S.) churches also emerged within England during the Protestant Reformation years, but they function in the middle between Protestant and Roman Catholic in terms of their authority structure. Even though they have bishops and an archbishop of all Anglicans in England, local bodies of churches and local congregations have a lot more power and independence to influence decisions affecting their local churches and communities than in Roman Catholic churches. Then there are Lutheran and Methodist Protestant churches which fall somewhere in the middle between Anglican and Reformed churches in terms of their structure because they have bishops but no archbishop, and there is even more independence at the local congregational level.

So then, in terms of authority from top down there are:

Roman Catholic/Orthodox > Anglican > Lutheran/Methodist > Reformed/Presbyterian/United.

3) Within Reformation Protestantism, however, there was a further split of groups who wanted to be less formally clergy-led and bound to regional presbyterial or denominational bodies. Whether they called themselves: Baptist, Congregational, Mennonite, Brethren, and more recently: Pentecostal, these groups believed every congregation was independent and each

congregation decided whether they had formally trained clergy or any organized body beyond the individual congregation. Power and authority were not a balance between clergy and lay but totally lay driven.

Where are we at Armour Heights? We are Presbyterian and therefore, Reformed. We are part of the Presbytery of East Toronto, within the Synod of Central, Northeastern Ontario and Bermuda, and within the Presbyterian Church in Canada. However, in practical terms, the elders of our congregation have the power to decide much that happens in the life of the congregation. The minister(s) teach and guide the congregation, and this may influence the direction of decisions regarding mission and service, but ultimately, the elders decide with the minister having but a single vote among equals. Both minister and elders are ordained. There is full equality, and the only difference is one of function. A minister is a “teaching elder” whereas others are “ruling elders”.

The Presbytery and larger church are there to establish standards of education, pension and benefits for clergy, doctrine in a broad way, and collective endeavours in mission and ministry within Canada and around the world. Presbytery is also there to ensure the health and well-being of a congregation and intervene when there are disagreements between minister and congregation or a dispute within the congregation that cannot be resolved satisfactorily within the congregation itself.

This is but a snapshot of a much more detailed and nuanced topic. Please forward any questions or thoughts you may have to me at: hathan1964@hotmail.com