

Let's Do Presbyterianism: The Trinitarian Foundations of Biblical Church Polity

By James J. Cassidy

I. INTRODUCTION—INDIVIDUALISM AND CORPORATE IDENTITY: A TESTIMONIAL

My upbringing in Roman Catholicism solidified at least one thing in my mind. Like the imprint of a ruler on the back of the hand, forever impressed on my conscience was the corporate identity of the church. If the Roman Church is the Ark in which salvation is found, then all Catholics are on the same boat, going along for the ride together. We are ushered into the belly of the hull of mother Rome through the waters of Baptism and through the merits of Christ and all the saints. The merits of Mary and her intercession on our behalf continues to provide for the faithful a treasury of merit—if we will only partake of her riches through the sacraments and good works.

There was actually great assurance in Rome. It ultimately proved to be a false assurance, but mother church provided walls that made me feel safe and secure. If I am right with the church, I can know I am right with God. Every time I sinned, I was assured that there was forgiveness to be found at the confessional booth and by the benediction of the priest. The sacrament of reconciliation very quickly became a source of easy believism. Sin it up on Friday and Saturday, and catch confession on Sunday to wash away all my sins. The system worked for me, and I found it quite comforting.

And so, growing up, we were able to say—with pride—“we are Catholics.” It was something to own as our own. In New Jersey everyone had a team that they called their own. Some were Mets fans, others were—unfortunately—Yankees fans. Some cheered for the Jets (those who were gluttons for punishment), and others the Giants. Likewise, your identity was also informed by your Catholicism. Love or hate it, you were a Catholic. Rome was the team you cheered for and identified

with. And whether one was a Yankee fan or a Mets fan, we all self-identified as Catholics.

We were born together that way, we went to CCD together, we went to school together, we had the same nuns together, we served as altar boys together, and as Catholics we would die together. From cradle to grave, Mother Rome would carry us all the way.

Yes, membership had its privileges. We were Catholics. We were the normal ones. Unlike those weird born-againers. Sure, we knew we would have to burn off some years in purgatory. But, then again, so does everyone else. No big deal. Our identities were wrapped up in Mother Church.

But the individual, personal, and relational were somewhat missing. God was mediated through the Church, by way of a priest. And especially by the Chief Priest, the Pope. And so, to have a personal relationship with Jesus, one has to have a personal relationship with the Church. You come to Christ by identifying yourself with the church. You became one with the church, you achieved solidarity with Rome, and in your solidarity you were related to Christ. Corporate identity was the primary emphasis, with the Pope as the head and king of the church. And as the consummate pastor-celebrity, the Pope was only mediated to us through the TV. Most of us would never meet him, never mind have a personal relationship with him.

But there was comfort in losing our individual identity to the corporate church. It was safe, we were anonymous, we hid in the shallows of the confessional booths.

THE AUTHOR: James J. Cassidy (Ph.D., WTS, Pa.) is pastor of South Austin Presbyterian Church, a church plant of The Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He is an articles editor for *The Confessional Presbyterian*, and has contributed several articles to previous issues: “Critical-Realism & the Relation of Redemptive Act to Revelatory Word” (v2, 2006); “Francis Turretin and Barthianism: The Covenant of Works in Historical Perspective” (v5, 2009); “No ‘Absolute Impeccability’: Charles Hodge and Christology at Old and New Princeton” (v9, 2013).

No one would confront us with our sins, our real sins, and call us to existential repentance, to personally own our sins as our own. We would not be called to come to Jesus as naked in the guilt of our sin looking for dress. We would not sing: “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.”

Like the Pharisee going up to the temple to thank God that he was not a sinner like the tax collector, our hearts were filled with spiritual pride as we proceeded to the front of the sanctuary—for all to see—with our hands folded to receive the Host from the priest. Then, we would do the sign of the cross, walk back to our kneelers, bow our heads in a sanctimonious prayer-position and begin to wonder about the score of the game or the cute girl sitting in front of us.

But then I was converted.

I came to know Jesus. To know him really, truly, personally. *Mano a mano*. I was led to the Lord by a Baptist, who told me I needed Jesus in my heart as my personal Lord and savior. And I came to Jesus personally, individually. Right there in my college dorm room. No church building. No confessional. No priest. No Host. Thereafter I was re-baptized and joined the local Southern Baptist Church—in New Hampshire.

Anyway, I was discipled by Baptists. And gone were the days of corporate identity and solidarity. I was on my own. I was released from the shackles of Rome and institutional Christianity. I had me, my Bible, and Jesus.

Yes, I had a church. I was a member of the SBC. But, really, that was on the side. The church could come or go. It didn't matter. Me and Jesus were getting along just fine. He was the only accountability partner I needed. I was not instructed in the importance of the doctrine of the church, taught anything about church discipline (well, with the exception of tithing and the importance of being re-baptized), and nothing about how my local church was (or was not) answerable to other churches in the denomination or who was to discipline my pastor should he get out of line. And thus began a stretch of living in evangelical individualism.

I went from one extreme to the other.

So, which is better? Which is more biblical: Individualism or getting lost in corporate identity? Does the Bible emphasize the one over the many, or the many over the one? Where does the accent fall in the Bible? On the individual believer and his or her personal relationships of an informal manner, or on the one church

and its corporate identity? To answer that, we need to first do a little Biblical Theology. So, hang in there with me, I will make this as painless as possible.

But before we do so, let me lay out for you my thesis: The doctrine of the Trinity provides for us the divine basis for understanding the biblical view of church polity as having a one-and-many harmony such that both crass individualism and the loss of the individual in its absorption in corporate solidarity are rejected. This means that a proper biblical view of accountability will yield an ecclesiology which maintains a proper balance between the individual and the corporate, without the one swallowing up the other.

II. WHAT DOES THE BIBLE HAVE TO SAY?

A. THE TRINITY

The source and foundation of all theology is the triune God of Scripture. In the beginning was God. That is to say, before the beginning, God existed. Before time, before the heavens and the earth, God existed by and with himself.

This truth has, unfortunately, led some to conclude that the reason why God created was because he was lonely. He needed creation and humanity for fellowship. To this claim, we say: “That’s a bunch of malarkey.” God was not lonely. Why?

You see, God does not *become* triune though history. No, from the beginning, as we see in Genesis 1, God is. And he subsists as Father, and as Spirit—hovering—and as the Son-Word—witnessed by his speaking everything into existence. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is not three Gods. But he is one God who IS three persons. And so the three persons are not parts of God. Rather, the three persons all *are* God. One cannot conceive of the Three persons either distinct from or apart from the singular divine nature. Nor may one think of the singular divine nature without also contemplating the three persons. As Gregory of Nazianzus so profoundly has said, “No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the Splendor of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish Them than I am carried back to the One.”¹

So, the three persons and the one essence—or God’s Godness—are equally ultimate. He is no more One than he is Three, and no more Three than One. The singular being of God and the various persons are in perfect harmony and equality. God is perfect. He is, in himself, both one and many—and ultimately, equally so.

1. Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 40, On Holy Baptism Preached at Constantinople Jan. 6, 381. Cf. *NPNF2*, vol. 7, p. 375.

B. THE *PACTUM SALUTIS*

Before the creation, God ordained all things which come to pass. Now, we can get really lost here in the doctrine of God's eternal decree. We will avoid that here, and save the confusion for another time.

For now, let's focus on one aspect of the decree, the *Pactum Salutis* (hereafter, *PS*). The *PS* means the covenant of salvation, redemption, or peace. From all eternity God acts with and within himself. The *PS* is an eternal covenant between the respective members of the Trinity whereby they covenant together for the purpose of bringing about the salvation of elect sinners in time.

Now, the triune God's act to covenant with himself for the salvation of the elect is a distinct act from his being. His being is, and always would have been, even if God chose not to elect and form a covenant with himself. So, in no way does his decree determine who he is. Rather, God's covenantal decree flows from who he is. Because he is triune, because he is three persons - and not unipersonal—he can and does covenant with himself. You cannot have a covenant unless there is more than one party involved.

And so, from all eternity the Father covenants with the Son that the Son will take on human flesh in the fullness of time and there lay down his life for the elect of the Father. And the Spirit is the covenant bond of love between the Father and the Son.

Here we see that within the one God we have the several persons in working cooperation. It is one salvation planned, decreed, and covenanted by the three persons. In this way the one and the many are in perfect balance and harmony, both in terms of his eternal being and his works for us in the eternal decree.

Therefore, you can see that creation was in no way necessary for the happiness and well-being of God. God was perfectly content in and of himself because in and of himself he enjoyed an eternal and infinite fellowship of persons. In that fellowship of persons, there was perfect personal interaction between the respective individual persons of the godhead. That relationship culminated in a relationship in which they covenanted with one another for the salvation of the elect.

In other words, in the triune God of Scripture we have the perfect harmony of the one and the many, the individual and the corporate, without the one eclipsing the other. God's eternal triune being grounds his eternal decree in such a way that the one and the many remain in harmony and balance.

C. CREATION AND THE COVENANT OF WORKS

In creation, then, we see precisely what we might expect from a one-and-many God. We find one creation. But immediately, there are many aspects of it—the heavens and the earth. And then God continues to individualize creation. He separates the waters from the land and the day from the night. He will eventually separate humanity out from the dust of the ground. Out of the one earth, God will make many individuals. The one and many idea is embedded in the creation itself.

But even in humanity there is a one-and-many. Listen to these words in Genesis 1: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." God creates one humanity, but he creates them not simply as an individual, but as a pair. Geerhardus Vos points out how man—precisely in his relatedness—is the perfect revelation of the triune God. Vos says it succinctly: "The creature in all his relationships should be a means to the revelation of the virtues of God."²

It is not good that the man is alone. And so he is given a helpmeet. Individualism is not good. And yet, man and woman are not so identified that they lose their individuality. They—together—are "humanity." But they also have names. The one is Adam, the other is Eve. Their individuality is affirmed, while at the same time their corporate identity is equally affirmed as collective humanity. The creation reflects its creator in its one-and-many-ness.

And here I am building off of the *vestigia Trinitatis* tradition. Proposed by Augustine, advanced by Thomas, and advocated by Reformed theologians such as Edwards and Bavinck, the *vestigia Trinitatis* argues that there are traces, vestiges of the Trinity in the created order, especially in humanity which is made in the image and likeness of God. God has made his invisible attributes known in the things that have been made (Romans 1:20), and that is especially the case with regard to his triune being. God has indelibly stamped the fact that he is three-in-one upon the things that have been made. And so when we behold the creation with new, regenerate eyes and with the aid of special revelation we can unmistakably see the revelation of the Trinity in nature generally and in humanity particularly.

But wait, there's more! God enters into a covenant with Adam. Adam, on the basis of this covenant, is to

2. Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1980), 248.

obey God's law—do not eat of the tree. If he eats, he will surely die. If he does not eat, he will be rewarded with eternal life. This is what we call the covenant of works.

But we know, from Romans 5, that this covenant was not made with *just* Adam. For we know that in Adam “all die.” Adam is the individual—the one—who represents all humans—the many. In the covenant, then, we see the corporate element as well. God covenants with an individual—but not with just an individual. With the one he covenants with the many—all of humanity. So, when Adam fell, so did we all. Adam plunged *not just* himself into sin and depravity—but all of the human race.

And so, this is how we should see sin and depravity. In more broadly evangelical theology, individualism reigns—even in their doctrine of sin. Sin is understood almost exclusively in terms of individual, personal culpability. In other words, sin is what I as an individual person choose to do. But that is only one aspect of the Bible's teaching on sin—albeit, a true and indispensable aspect. Consider with me the WSC 18:

Q. 18. *Wherein consists the sinfulness of that estate wherewith man fell?*

A. The sinfulness of that estate wherewith man fell consists in the guilt of Adam's first sin, the want of original righteousness, and the corruption of his whole nature, which is commonly called original sin; together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it.

Now, notice the Catechism is here talking about sinfulness. It has in mind particularly the sinfulness of the estate—or condition—into which man fell. What kind of condition did original sin, the sin of the one, plunge the many into?

Now, before we get into the meat of the answer, consider first that last line. “Together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it.” That is a reference to individual sins of individuals. So, we affirm the idea of individual culpability. But, our actual sins proceed from our original sin. In other words, we sin because we are sinners, we are not sinners only because we actually sin.

So, what is the nature of our original sin? First, notice, it consists in guilt. That is a legal term. Before the judgment seat of the judge of all the earth, we-in-Adam are guilty of Adam's first sin. No, we did not commit the sin ourselves, Adam did. Yet by virtue of the covenant arrangement, Adam's sin is our sin. He did it, but we are held culpable for it, with him. He represented us in the covenant of works. In Adam, in other words, was us all. And here the covenant once again informs

this notion of the one-and-many, the corporate and individual. Adam is the one who represents the many.

But there is also the want of original righteousness. Its one thing to be *not guilty*. Its another to be *innocent*. Just because one is found not-guilty does not mean that one is righteous. It's one thing to be forgiven of one's sin; it's another to be righteous—having perfectly kept the law of God. Adam's sin means we are in double trouble. We are guilty of sin, and we also lack the original righteousness needed to get the reward of eternal life.

But notice there is corruption as well. The corruption of our *whole nature*. In other words, our nature malfunctions now. We are polluted by sin. We bleed when we should not. Our bodies leak all sorts of fluids which were originally supposed stay in us! Our minds and wills do not function rightly. In other words, we are totally depraved. And because of that, we can never even begin down the road of salvation in and of ourselves. We are dead. In other words, sin is not just something we chose to do, it is what we *are*. Its not just that we sin, but we *are* sin. Sin is not just guilt, but corruption as well.

Now, the doctrine of total depravity does not mean we are as sinful or as depraved as we can be. It means that our depravity is thorough. It extends to every aspect of our being. It extends all throughout humanity, and its effects are felt all throughout creation. Nevertheless, God—in what we call common grace—preserves his creation despite itself. He suppresses our sin, keeping us from being as corrupt as we can be. So, even the unbeliever retains the image of God in him. He still has the law of God pricking his conscience, so he knows it's wrong when he steals or murders or commits adultery. The rain falls upon the unbelieving farmer just as much as upon the believer. The sun shines upon the unbeliever just as it does the believer. God preserves his creation, and humanity, despite itself. So important is this common grace that without it all of creation would implode. It would destroy itself. It would cease to exist, in fact. But God upholds the creation, and keeps it going. This is the mercy of God.

And because of its *preservation* character, common grace is just an aspect of the doctrine of Providence. God upholds and preserves all things, despite the fall. For example, we see this grace appear, in a potent way, in God's covenant with Noah. God destroys the earth in the flood, with the exception of one man and his family. This is special grace. God chose Noah. But not just Noah. He chose Noah and his family.

Again, we see the covenantal one-and-many even here. Noah is the covenant representative of his family for salvation. But after the flood God makes a promise. He

makes a promise to Noah, and through Noah the promise is for all of humanity. Not just Noah, not just his family, but for the whole earth. He will not destroy the earth again with water. He gives the sacrament of the Noahic covenant—the rainbow. The rainbow extends over all of humanity/creation. It is a sign and seal of his mercy and grace to the common creation. Not mercy or grace for salvation and eternal life, but mercy and grace for preservation. History will continue even after the flood.

And this history is the plane, field, or stage upon which God will carry out his redemptive purposes for the elect. In other words, without common grace there is no special grace. Without common history, there is no redemptive history. In this way, then, God's common grace serves his special grace. But they are never to be confused with one another. Common grace does not give forgiveness. It does not give eternal life. It is not eschatological, but sub-eschatological.

But to deny common grace is to leave redemptive history hanging in the air, disconnected from this present evil age. And while the covenant of grace is not of this present evil age, it is a covenant that God enacts upon the stage and field of this present evil age. Without common grace, in other words, redemption becomes an abstract Platonic idea.

D. THE COVENANT OF GRACE

So, let's move on to special grace and go back from Noah to the Garden. OK, Adam has fallen. Because of his rebellion, he deserves immediate death in hell forever. But he does not receive this death. No, his life is preserved by God. God has temporarily suspended the judgment against Adam. The Word of God said, "On the day you eat of it, you will surely die." Adam did not die that day. And so, even here God's common grace kicks in at the first.

But common grace is not good enough. *God does not extend Adam's life on earth just to extend his life on earth.* No, he preserves Adam's life so that he can make a promise to Adam and Eve. The promise is that the seed of the woman will come and crush the head of the seed of the serpent. Satan will not win. There will be redemption! And then God clothes Adam and Eve, covering their shame and their nakedness. He delivers them not only from immediate judgment in fleshly death, but he delivers them from spiritual death as well. And he makes a covenant of grace with them. He does so through a promise. The covenant of grace is always and everywhere identified by divine promise! And God promises to Adam and Eve that the woman's seed will

crush the head of the serpent's seed (Genesis 3:15). And in so doing, we understand now, he will redeem his people from their sin and from the clutches of the accuser. Now, the identity of that seed and the fulfillment of that promise would take time. And the preservation of time, history, and creation in God's mercy serves as the redemptive-history context in which the promise is fulfilled and salvation comes to God's people. This, of course, is the biblical philosophy of history.

And so, that promise is characterized by some important elements. Paul in Romans 5 explains to us that where the first Adam failed, the second Adam succeeded. Why is it so very important that Jesus resist temptation in the wilderness—and throughout his whole life? It is not only to be kept from disqualifying himself as the spotless lamb of God. Though it is that. But also because he too is under the stipulations of the covenant of works. He too, as the second Adam, is under a probational period. Will he keep the Law of God? That is the question. And according to Paul in Romans 5:12ff, he did keep the law, and in keeping the law secured a righteousness for those he represented—the elect. While the sin of the first man led to death, so the righteousness of the second man leads to eternal life. In Christ, therefore, we find a righteousness that is not our own. It is a righteousness imputed to us by faith alone.

Christ is therefore the covenant representative-head of his people. Adam represented all of the human race. So, what he did, we did. Likewise is the case with Christ. Only he does not represent all of humanity, but all of the elect. That is all those the Father has given to him (John 10:29; 17:11, 24). And as representative, what he does is credited to the elect, made effectual at their coming to Spirit-wrought, God-given faith-union with him. In this way, we can once again see how the one-and-many obtains. Christ is the one head of his body, which is his church. And that one body *is* many members, as Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. We will say more about that below.

E. ESCHATOLOGY

But, for now, we need to say that Christ did not come just to redeem individuals. He did come to redeem individuals, but more than individuals. He came to redeem individuals in order to bring them to their chief end, the ultimate blessedness: to dwell with God forever.

This is the inheritance of the saints. The doctrine of the inheritance of the saints entails both a people and a place. The people of God are the redeemed, having become sons of God unto an eternal inheritance which

is unfading and imperishable (1 Peter 1). In the Bible it is called the new heavens and new earth (Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1). And here humanity will be placed into a new creation where God will dwell in eternal fellowship with his people. ■

III. ECCLESIOLOGY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

A. AFFIRMATIONS OF INDIVIDUAL SOTERIOLOGY

Speaking of God's people, let's transition to talk about practical application of these things to our lives, and to the life of the church in particular. For it is here, in the church, that the one-and-many concept has its practical punch. And so, to clarify, allow me to make two points by way of application. 1) The biblical doctrine of the church emphasizes membership. 2) Church membership reflects something of our Triune God who makes covenant within himself and with his creation. The one who is in himself one-and-many is the eternal blueprint—precisely in his one-and-manyness—for the building and structure of his gathered people, the church. In other words, there is something truly God-like about the church, its discipline, and the concept of accountability.

So, first, let's consider 1 Corinthians 12:12-31. Here Paul holds together a one-and-many balance with regard to the nature of the church. On the one hand, he allows for the individual identity of believers (the many). Notice the language of v. 12: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ." Notice how Paul affirms the many. The members of the Body, though one, are many. The individual believer is an individual member of the Body. Paul goes on to speak about feet, hands, ears, and eyes. The eye is not identified with the body as a whole. The eye is not absorbed into the body. And the eye is not the ear. So, Bob is not Susan. And Wilma is not Fred. Wilma is not Susan, and Bob is not Fred. Bob is not Christ, and Christ is not Wilma. There is individual identity given to each of the many.

And as an aside, many Christians go on without joining a church. And they wonder to themselves, "Why should I join a church? Church membership is not biblical, it's a man-made thing." To which we should all be like, "What?" Paul talks about the church—the real, visible church—here as a body. A body made up of many individual what? Members!

B. CORPORATE IDENTITY

But, be that as it may, the members are still not

understood as existing in an individualistic way. The many are, after all, one. They are one body. They live—together—in Christ. Christ is their head, who unites them all individually to himself, and in him to one another. Our covenant identity and destiny is found with one another, in Christ. No one gets to heaven by himself. When one of us hurts, we all hurt. When one of us sins, we all feel the repercussions of that. We're all in this thing, called the Kingdom of God, together.

C. BIBLICAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND PRESBYTERIANISM

Now, you may be asking, what has all this to do with church polity? Well, it is precisely here, in the church, that we find the practical application of the one-and-many model to the idea of polity. Let's take accountability as an example. Oftentimes the idea of accountability among evangelical Christians is conceived of in an individualistic way. We say, "I need an accountability partner," or "Jesus is my accountability partner." And so the idea is one of having a one-on-one relationship in terms of keeping our sin in check. But the thing missing most broadly today is the idea of the church—the corporate church—and the means by which God has given us an accountability structure. Without rejecting the idea of one-on-one accountability—there is a place for that—what I want to talk about here is how that needs to be balanced with a robust, biblical doctrine of the church as each individual Christian's accountability partner.

So, that brings us to the idea of church government—or polity. If sin still indwells each of us, then church polity is a blessing given to us by God. And when we look carefully and closely at the Bible we find, actually, a wonderful system of church government.

Now, for many evangelical Christians, they don't see that. Generally they believe that church government is inconsequential at best and legalistic at worse. Polity is a free for all. The Bible doesn't say anything about it, so really it doesn't matter if you are Episcopalian, Presbyterian, or Congregational. As long as you preach sound doctrine. But, what people who argue that often forget is that church polity is a part of what it means to teach and preach and practice sound doctrine!

Now, our doctrine of the church is not so essential that if you don't get every aspect of it spot on you cease to exist as a church. The doctrine of justification or the Trinity are such essential doctrines that if you deny those you are no longer a true church. But getting the biblical doctrine of the church right is for *the good of*

the church. Theologians here make the distinction between the *esse* of the church and the *bene esse* of the church. There are certain essential—*esse*—things without which a church ceases to exist (e.g., sound preaching, right administration of the sacraments, discipline, etc.). And then there are those things which are for the *bene esse*, or well-being, of the church (e.g., church polity). So while we would say that neglecting the practice of church discipline would render a church apostate, the structure within which that discipline is carried out will vary from church to church.

Nevertheless, that structure is *not* inconsequential. It is for the good, for the betterment of the church, to have a structure that is as close to what the Bible teaches about church structure as possible. And the Bible does teach a certain form or structure for the church's government.

So, let's talk about the Bible's teaching on church form. As we do so, we must begin with the essential role of elders. For example, in local churches we see Paul exhorting Titus to appoint elders. After the greeting, the first thing that he tells Titus is that the reason why he left him in Crete was so that he could appoint elders in every town (Titus 1:5). He exhorts Titus to put what remains in order. Paul is concerned to order the churches, to structure them properly, and one of the essential elements to church order is the governance of elders. Therefore, elders are the primary rulers in the church.

According to Peter in 1 Peter, the elders are under-shepherds (1 Peter 5:1-5). They are to keep an eye on the flock of God that is among them. They are to teach sound doctrine (2 Tim 4:3). They are to keep a careful eye on their own doctrine and life, for by so doing they will save their listeners (1 Tim 4:16). Furthermore, they are to exercise the keys of the Kingdom. Those keys are given to the Apostles by Jesus in Matthew 16, and we can see those keys being passed on to the elders of the church in Peter's and Paul's writings particularly.

And so every Christian is accountable. He is accountable to his elders. And the elders are accountable to the broader church, particularly the Presbytery and General Assembly (more on that later). But elder-rule begins in the governing of the local church, enacting discipline when it is appropriate.

And discipline, by the way, is not always a negative thing. We should not think of it primarily as such. But church discipline is necessary. The Reformers believed that what allowed the church of Rome to fall into such horrible corruption is a lack of discipline. But discipline means, basically, discipleship. You can see in both

words a similar root word. And it denotes the idea of leading one to follow. Leading one to follow Christ. And there are positive ways that happens. Every time a Pastor preaches the Word to his people, he is discipling them—or disciplining them. But there is also a negative way. A way that is corrective. As Paul says to Timothy, the Word of God is profitable to correct and admonish. That is OK, there is nothing shameful about that. We all need correction. But for our purposes here, we see that it is given to elders to exercise that discipline. If a church is not governed by elders who hold the members of the church accountable, then that church is not acting like a biblical church. The church is not merely a collection or gathering of individual Christians, but the church is one body responsible to one another through the ministry of the eldership. The church, like our Triune God, is one-and-many.

Another aspect of rule by elders that is important to highlight, especially in light of the one-and-many theme we have been highlighting, is what we call the principle of "parity and plurality." Essential—that is non-negotiable—for rule by elders is that rule in the church must always be by a plurality of elders. That is to say, more than one. The Bible does not give the government of the church to just one man—whether on the local, regional, or universal level. The power of the church is never invested merely in one mere man. Proverbs teaches us that there is safety in the multitude of counselors (Proverbs 11:14). When you have one man calling the shots, at the top of the ecclesial ladder, who holds him accountable? Church power abhors a vacuum, and without a plurality of elders, someone will fill the gap and set himself up as a Pope. Biblical ecclesiology teaches that Jesus Christ alone is the head and king of the church. And if he alone is head of the church, then how can any one man claim to head up the church?

But this is not just a danger in the church of Rome, but also in independent churches today. The pastor is the boss, the big man, the head honcho. He is the man with the vision, the gifts, the drive, the education, and the time to run the show—all accountability is gone. And so, to forsake the equal ultimacy of the one-and-many in matters ecclesiological inevitably leads to a one man show in the church, corruption, and the forsaking of the most basic principles of accountability.

And so that brings us to our next characteristic of rule by elders—parity. The leadership of the church—in both the OT and NT—is made up of many elders, but they also rule as one. That is to say, the session is singular and plural in its singularity. So, each man on the board of elders—or session—has equal power: one

man, one vote. Each man gets a say. And so, when the majority votes to do something—right or wrong, and sometimes even the most godly of sessions can and do err—it is the act of the session as a whole. They move together as one man, even though they are many.

But the one-and-many has many layers to it. So, while individual Christians are accountable to the church through her elders, likewise individual churches are accountable to the church universal as a whole. Individual, independent, and autonomous churches fail to reflect the covenantal, one-and-many principle founded all throughout Scripture, and grounded in our Triune God.

In Acts 15 we see the manifestation of the one and many principle. You clearly have churches. But the many churches, when there is controversy in the local churches, appeal to the regional church (singular) as a whole. Each local church sends elder representatives to, what we like to call, “the first Presbytery meeting” or “the first General Assembly.” In this way of corporate accountability, we see that no church is on its own. It can’t be on its own. It would emphasize the individual many over the corporate one. But the universality of the church is made manifest in the gathering of representatives from local churches to rule over controversy in the local churches. In other words, congregationalism of a radical independent sort is American individualism applied to church polity. And the Bible will have none of it.

So, on this structure not only are individual church members held accountable to one another through the elders, but the elders are also held accountable. Elders are accountable not just to one another individually, but held accountable *in* the church and *by* the church.

So, for example, if a pastor or elder was teaching false doctrine or living immorally in the church, they could be held to account by the Presbytery that oversees their labors on the local level. If you have ever wondered what would happen if a pastor or elder were caught in a horrible and scandalous sin, then you would be benefited by thinking about the idea of a Presbytery. The Presbytery would be in charge of holding that minister or elder to account, and when necessary remove him from office and—when necessary—discipline him in other ways.

A practical way to see this at work would be with regard to church hopping. Church hopping is encouraged by congregational church polity (though it happens in every context!). If you don’t like what you see or hear at a local church, you can simply up and leave. In non-denominationalism, if sin or heresy arises, you may be compelled to leave a church. You have no other recourse. In Presbyterianism, you have biblical recourse to the higher courts, the Presbytery. You can—and

should—bring to the attention of the Presbytery the problems on the local level. This is a truly covenantal, churchly approach to the Christian life. And it is a distinctly Christian (because it is grounded in the Trinity) approach to accountability and church polity.

And so, we might conclude that Presbyterianism is a truly evangelical approach to the church. And by “evangelical” I do not mean the Creed-less, low church Christianity here in America. What I mean by it here is simply “Gospel-centered.” The Gospel teaches and is protected by checks and balances, accountability, higher courts of appeal, and elder-rule that is informed by parity and plurality. Because Presbyterianism is grounded in the God of the Gospel, in the very being of our Triune God—the original one-and-many—it is not only the most biblical form of government, but also the most gracious one as well! God’s graciousness and God’s structures are not opposed to one another, but actually sweetly comply.

But Presbyterianism is also grounded in how the Triune God reveals himself and his great plan of redemption, recorded for us in the Scriptures as they tell of the progress of redemptive revelation. In other words, Presbyterianism—while not always well-executed in reality—is grounded in the God of the Gospel, as well as in the Gospel of God’s covenant of grace. And for these reasons, we can and should—in fact we are compelled to say—that Presbyterian polity is not just an OK or valid form of church government, but it is *the* Bible’s given form of church government. There are details to how that form is carried out that good Presbyterians can debate, refine, or otherwise jettison. But the bones—the basic structure of Presbyterianism—is revealed to us in God’s special revelation. And that is why we should not be surprised that a faithful biblical theology of accountability yields a one-and-many structure that is encapsulated in that form of government known as Presbyterianism.

IV. CONCLUSION

As we survey the landscape of American Christianity, we can see typically two forms of government. On the one hand is the church of my upbringing, the church of Rome, along with its Protestant counterparts—Anglicanism, Methodism, and Lutheranism. Here, generally speaking, the emphasis is on a centralized form of church government and an ecclesiology in which the individual is swallowed up into the corporate. The many are lost for the one. And then, on the other hand, you

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listens, for his is the voice that spoke the heavens and the earth into existence. This is the God who empowers his people. May he be blessed forever.

FINAL REMARKS

This psalm tells a story, but not by means of a narrative. Instead we are given a succession of images, drawn from both the history of Israel in her experience with God, and from her prophetic future. The psalm shows by means of these images that God will not have his people from one people only, but will own all the kingdoms of the earth. To him every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord.■

Let's Do Presbyterianism: The Trinitarian Foundations of Biblical Church Polity. Continued from Page 76.

have independent and non-denominational churches in which the one is splintered into the many and eventually lost. By far, the latter is the predominant form of evangelical ecclesiology today. It is generally characterized by emphasis on the individual and personal to such an extent that the covenantal and corporate nature of the church is lost, or at least marginalized. Because of our history, here in America independency is the most attractive and popular form of church government. Now, in the early church there were many forms of Trinitarian errors floating around. To the one extreme, there were those who emphasized the unity of God such that the persons became mere apparitions. This was the error that was known as modalism. On the other hand, the persons were so emphasized that each person of the Trinity were given their own independent status as divine such that the unity of God was compromised. This is known as tritheism—a heresy repopularized today in the theology of post-modern theologians like Jürgen Moltmann.

The answer to these errors is a balanced view of the Trinity in whom unity and diversity, the one and the many, are equally ultimate. I would argue that our ecclesiology should, because it does in the Bible, reflect and imitate God by making unity and diversity, the one and the many, the individual and the corporate, equally ultimate. And I believe I have shown that that balance is reflected in Presbyterianism.

Now, that does not mean Presbyterianism can never go bad. It can, and it has. Sin still pollutes the church because the church is made up of sinners who still war against the flesh. And so, any church government will only function well if its members are faithful to their Lord and his Word. But, that does not change the fact that Presbyterianism (though corrupted in the past and the present) reflects its Triune God and is modeled on the teaching of the Bible as a whole.

Yes, it remains a counter-cultural ecclesiology. It is

completely *contra mundum*. But that is why it's also refreshing. It is refreshing because it is so different from what everyone else is doing. Radical independence, or tyrannical corporate solidarity, is the order of the day. For once, as Christians, let's do something different. Let's do Presbyterianism.■

Which Comes First, The Intellect or the Will? Continued from Page 128.

Edwards—or finds him unconvincing or misguided. Yet how would Edwards come across this way if he isn't already being read through the lens of faculty psychology—as he surely was in the eyes of Charles Chauncey?

Plantinga reads Edwards as a sort of intellectualist with the priority of the intellect in the workings of true affections. That would be true after a fashion, as long as it was understood that Edwards was trying to move away from faculty psychology and *not* away from making legitimate distinctions of the powers of the human soul. We can speak of a “priority” of the intellect in Edwards only so long as that priority is understood in terms of taxis or functional order—and not primacy of importance.

Plantinga also seems to equate the affections with emotions. Plantinga recognizes that sin, for instance, can be understood as *blindness*, as a not seeing God or the great things of the gospel as the truly lovely things they are. But sin is also a *willful* blindness. It is a hatred of the loveliness of God and his attributes. We are responsible for our failure to see. We can distinguish the powers of the soul, but we cannot separate them. And we should not consider the intellect or the will more important than the other. After all, God made us with both. Admittedly, sin has wreaked havoc in this area just as it has in others. We sinful human beings tend to prize one power over the other. We still struggle with the same extremes Edwards faced.

So What?

So what is the difference between Edwards and Plantinga? It *may* be minimal in practical effect. Plantinga's discussion would have benefitted from an historical awareness of the context of the Great Awakening, from a knowledge of Edwards' desire to transcend faculty psychology, and from a correct definition of the religious affections. The way Plantinga asks the question, “which comes first” suggests to me that he doesn't realize that for Edwards, the affections involved both the intellect and the will. Either option is possible for Edwards as long as both are understood to be involved in the exercise of true religious affections.

Is there much difference between Plantinga the concurrentist and Edwards? Sometimes I get the impression that he