

## Hope Community Church

### Week 10 - Statement of Faith: Religious Liberty

*Leader's Note: This study has a lot of content that may potentially require more time than just one study. As a leader, we trust you'll be able to gauge the amount of time needed for your group to go over the material.*

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#### Statement of Faith: Religious Liberty

We believe that every human being has direct relations with God, and is responsible to God alone in all matters of faith; that each church is independent and must be free from interference by an ecclesiastical political authority; that therefore Church and State must be kept separate as having different functions, each fulfilling its duties free from dictation or patronage of the other.

**Ice Breaker Question:** Does anyone know any powerful or important people in the world? If so, what kind of access do you have to them?

Most of us don't know any powerful or important people, and if we do we typically only have access to them through a PR team or social media interactions. It's difficult to have a personal relationship with them. In this study, we want to look into how a personal relationship with God through Jesus ensures that we need no other ecclesiastical or political authority to mediate on our behalf.

#### Priesthood Of Believers

**Read aloud: 1 Timothy 2:5 (NIV)**

<sup>5</sup>For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus

**?** Why do we need a mediator with God?

*Possible Answers: we are sinners, God is holy...*

**?** The Hope statement of faith begins by stating, *"We believe that every human being has direct relations with God and is responsible to God alone in all matters of faith..."* How can we have a mediator between us and God AND direct relations with God? Isn't that a contradiction?

*Possible Answers: No, because Jesus is God. If we have a relationship with Jesus, then we have a relationship with God.*

**?** Can someone like a priest or another believer mediate for us? Why or why not?

*Possible Answers: No, our mediator has to be Jesus because He is God and is the only mediator that allows us to have a direct relationship with God. Other people cannot pay the price that Jesus did and thus gift us genuine faith in God...*

? As a believer, how do you feel about being a priest of God? Do you feel qualified? If not, why?

*Possible answers: I feel disqualified. I don't think that what I do could be good enough for God. I feel overjoyed at being a priest of God because that means I have direct access to him and in whatever I do, He's there.*

In the Old Covenant, Israel had to relate to God through a few, chosen human mediators (i.e. priests) and therefore most people did not have direct relations to God. (see Hebrews 7:11-28). Now, in the New Covenant, we all have direct access to God through Jesus and so are all chosen as priests (see 1 Peter 2:9)

### **Read aloud: Hebrews 13:15-16 (NIV)**

<sup>15</sup> Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. <sup>16</sup> And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

*Leader's note: While the priests of the Old Covenant offered physical sacrifices to God in order to remain in the presence of God, the New Covenant says that believers, as priests, now get to offer spiritual sacrifices because we are already in the presence of God through Jesus. Jesus met the qualifications for us, and so we remain in the presence of God. (Additional Resource:*

*<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/becoming-a-spiritual-house-and-holy-priesthood>)*

*Additional scripture references: Romans 12:1, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Philippians 4:8*

? If our spiritual sacrifices don't work to keep us in the presence of God, what is their purpose?

*Possible answers: We were made to do those works (see Ephesians 2:10). We were made to worship God. We are happy to worship God. It cares for others in a godly way. Shares the love of God with others. We worship God through our actions.*

? What is a spiritual sacrifice that you can offer this week?

*Possible answers: I can write a letter to someone. I can read my Bible in the morning. I can try to reduce distractions so that I can focus on my work and do it well. I can finish my homework on time.*

? 1 Peter 2:9 calls all believers a royal priesthood, in which we are all priests together. How can we help one another offer spiritual sacrifices?

*Possible answers: I can call my friend and encourage them and see how they're doing. I can ask someone to be my accountability partner. I can help someone understand a difficult subject in either school or work.*

### **The Roles Of Church And State**

*Leader's note: We believe that people, made in the image of God, personally rebelled against him that they also, through Christ, can personally respond to God in reconciliation through the cross of Jesus Christ. Because this relationship is personal, we believe it is a prerogative of the state to abstain from any*

*attempts to interfere or legislate divine matters. We believe that governments have no place in interfering or legislating personal relationships with God because their primary role, as given by God, is the restraint of evil in society. Only the church has the God-given ability to speak as a spiritual authority in the lives of believers (i.e. elders guiding a local body). In layman's terms - The government can't tell you who or how to worship.*

We've discussed the duties of believers (namely spiritual sacrifices), and we'll go ahead and expand those duties to be a part of the function of the church as well. Specifically, the purpose of the institution of the church is to make spiritual sacrifices to God in the following three ways<sup>1</sup>

1. Ministry to God through Worship
2. Ministry to Believers through Nurture
3. Ministry to the World through Evangelism and Mercy

? How do you see Hope, and the church at large, fulfilling these duties (making these spiritual sacrifices)?

*Possible Answers: Singing on Sunday morning. Engaging with partner ministries. Hope on Campus. Facilitating small groups.*

Ecclesiastical Political Authority – A figure within either a Christian denomination or a secular government that has been empowered to dictate the affairs of individual churches. Examples of ecclesiastical political authorities would include the Pope as the head of the Catholic church, Presbyteries within the Presbyterian church, governmental officials of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that dictate what a church can and can't teach theologically.

In doing these duties, Hope believes *"...that each church is independent and must be free from interference by an ecclesiastical political authority..."*

? Can you think of any other ecclesiastical political authorities?

*Possible Answers: Priests, Pope, Cardinals, Presbytery, Bishops*

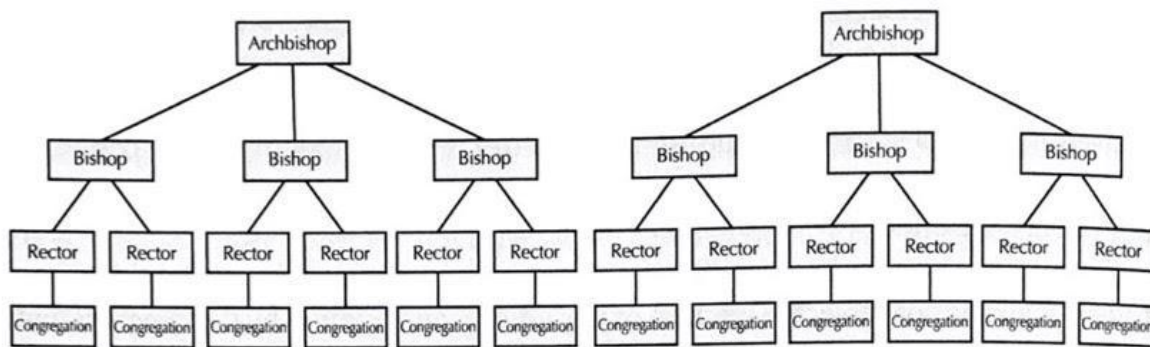
Within Christianity, there are three main ways churches organize themselves (i.e. forms of church government)<sup>2</sup>:

1. Episcopalian – An organizational structure of church government where individual local congregations are led by rectors and grouped into dioceses which are overseen by bishops. Bishops are then overseen by archbishops. Examples of this system of church government include the Catholic Church, Anglican Church, and Episcopal Church.

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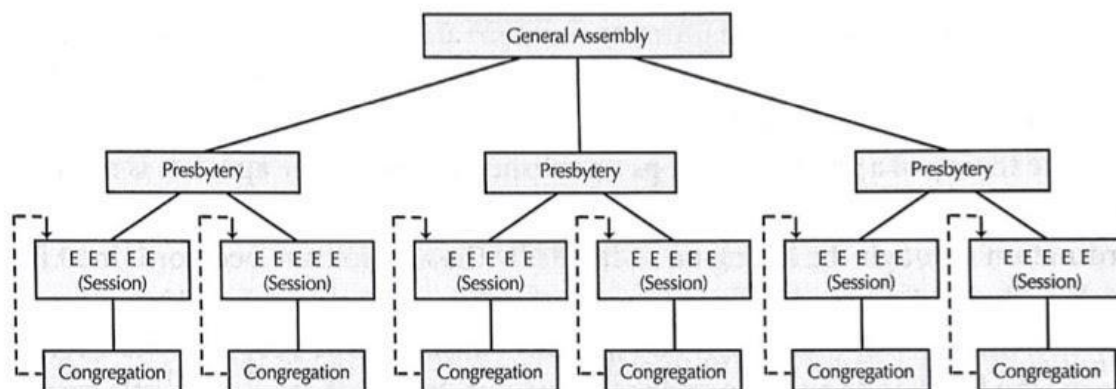
<sup>1</sup> Taken from *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem pp. 867-868

<sup>2</sup> The following definitions and charts are adapted from Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*.



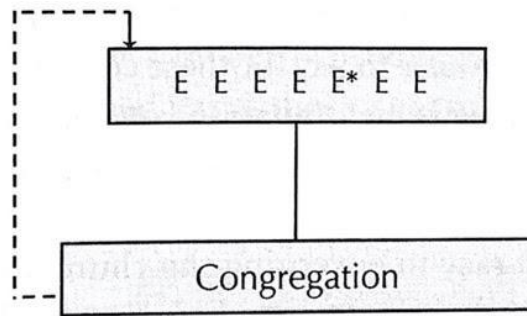
## EPISCOPALIAN GOVERNMENT

2. Presbyterian — An organizational structure where each local church elects elders to a session (E in the figure stands for elders, and the dotted lines indicate that the whole congregation elects the elders). The pastor of the church will be one of the elders in the session, equal in authority to the other elders. This session has governing authority over the local church. However, the members of the session (the elders) are also members of a presbytery, which has authority of several churches in a region. This presbytery consists of some or all of the elders in the local churches over which it has authority. Moreover, some of the members of the presbytery are members of the “general assembly” which usually will have authority over all the Presbyterian churches in a nation or region. This organizational structure is where Presbyterian Churches get their name.



## PRESBYTERIAN GOVERNMENT

3. Congregational — An organizational structure in which a local church does not recognize any ecclesiastical political authority beyond the walls of its own congregation (hence the name, congregational). Although there are several forms of a congregational government, the below diagram illustrates the governmental model of Hope (i.e. Plural Local Elder Government). In this particular model, members of the local congregation are appointed by vote to an elder board. The pastor of the congregation is also a member of the elder board and holds equal authority to all the other elders on the board.



\* Pastor

## PLURAL LOCAL ELDER GOVERNMENT

Hope believes that “...every human being has direct relations with God and is responsible to God alone in all matters of faith; that each church is independent and must be free from interference by an ecclesiastical political authority;” This belief means Hope is defined as a congregational church. Specifically, Hope is a Baptist church led by a plurality of elders where the pastor is one of the elders and does not have more authority or power than the rest of them. As a Baptist church, we do not recognize any authority beyond the bounds of our individual church other than Jesus, this includes leadership within denominations and organizations we associate ourselves with (Acts29, Converge, EFCA).

**?** If Hope is a congregational church, recognizing no authority outside our walls, why do you think we associate with denominations or organizations?  
*Possible answers: Because it gives us access to resources we might not otherwise have. We might have networking possibilities. We also become a resource to other like-minded entities.*

Hope, as a church, operates under the conviction that ecclesiological government operates at no level higher than the local congregation. Our associations with Acts29, EFCA and Converge are voluntary in that we align with their visions to plant churches and make the gospel known throughout the world – we feel it helps us contribute to that vision more effectively than we could on our own.

**?** Knowing Hope’s church government structure, why might it be important to Hope that our associations be voluntary rather than compulsory?  
*Possible answers: we can decide our own theological convictions. We are better able to hold accountable our elders and church members because there is no messy denominational politics. We’re not “married to” Acts29 or Converge—We can remove ourselves if our convictions part ways.*

We’ve talked about the role of the church, now let’s talk about the role of the state.

### Read aloud: Romans 13:1-7 (NIV)

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. <sup>2</sup> Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. <sup>3</sup> For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be

commended. <sup>4</sup> For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. <sup>6</sup> This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. <sup>7</sup> Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

? According to the passage, what authority do you see the government having?

*Possible answers: authority to punish wrongdoers*

? How does this passage encourage Christians to interact with human rulers and authorities?

*Possible answers: Honor governments. Pay taxes. Obey the law. Submit to authorities. Fear God, not the government. Pray for leaders.*

Hope's statement of faith says "...that therefore Church and State must be kept separate as having different functions, each fulfilling its duties free from dictation or patronage of the other." In other words, the God-given authority of government is only to function as a body that restrains an excess of evil amongst society and therefore has no authority or power within the church.

"God imposed upon mankind the fear of man, for mankind did not acknowledge the fear of God. So He did this in order that, being subjected to the authority of men, and kept under restraint by their law, mankind might obtain some degree of justice. They might exercise mutual forbearance through dread of the sword...Earthly rule, therefore, has been appointed by God for the benefit of the nations...This is so that under the fear of human rulers, man may not eat each other up like fishes. Rather, through the establishment of laws, men may keep down an excess of wickedness among the nations."  
Church Father Irenaeus (180 AD)

? What are some reasons that God set up government & church to work in this way?

*Possible answers: Because Jesus compels people to freely choose to follow him and live like him, if the church were to legislate following Jesus it would cease to be a free relationship. Secular governments don't have the spiritual insight to have an accurate say in church matters. God saw fit to separate these duties in order for those institutions to focus more fully on their own duty.*

*Leader's note: Additional scripture references: 1 Peter 2:11-25, 1 Peter 5:5, Romans 13:1-7, 1 Timothy 2:1-3, 1 Timothy 5:17, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13*

### For Discussion And Accountability

- If the Church & State have different functions and must be kept separate, how do we, as part of the church, engage in civic functions?
- How can you personally honor the church and state governments to which you are subject? How can we encourage you in this?