

Hope Community Church

Week 10 - Statement of Faith: Religious Liberty

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

1 Timothy 2:5 (NIV)

⁵For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus

? Why do we need a mediator with God?

? 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?

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

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

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)

Hebrews 13:15-16 (NIV)

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

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

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

? 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?

The Roles Of Church And State

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 ways¹

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)?

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.

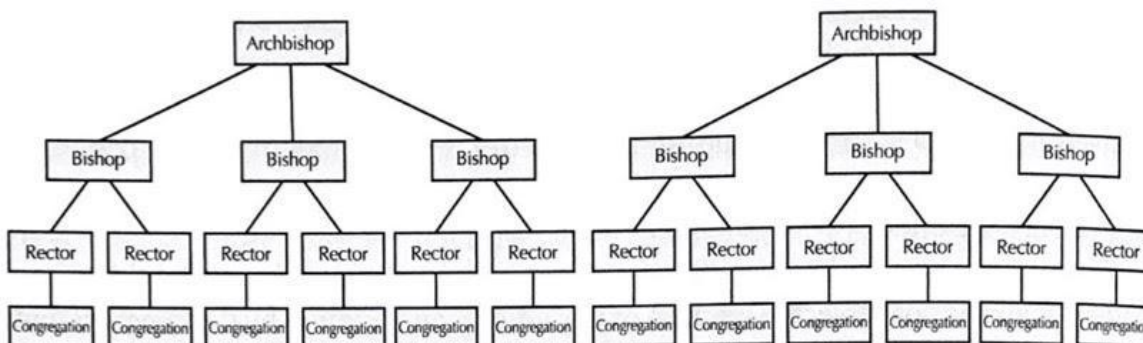
In doing these duties, Hope believes *"...that each church is independent and must be free from interference by an ecclesiastical political authority..."*

? Can you think of any other ecclesiastical political authorities?

¹ Taken from *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem pp. 867-868

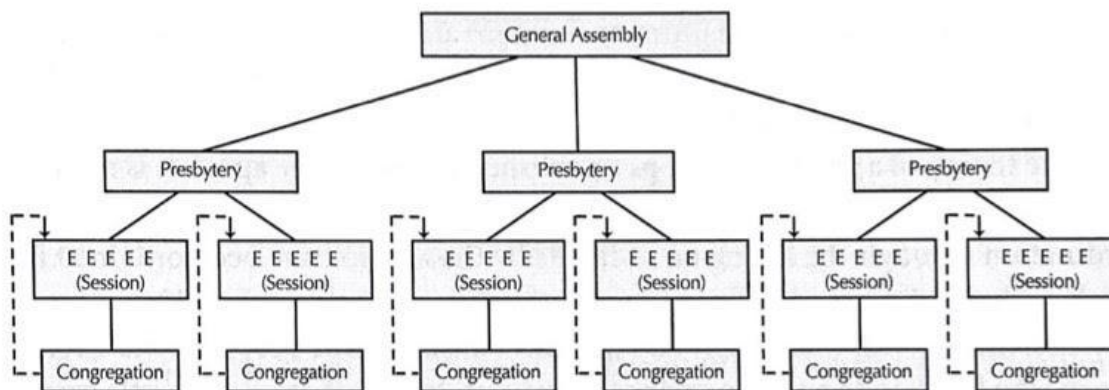
Within Christianity, there are three main ways churches organize themselves (i.e. forms of church government)²:

1. Episcopal – 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.



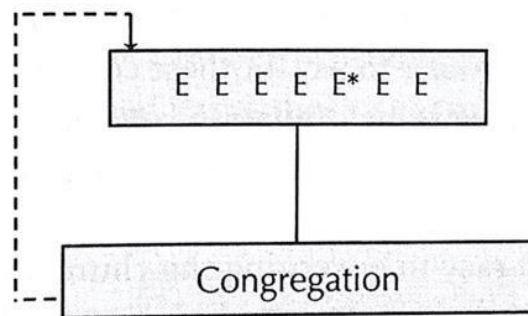
EPISCOPALIAN GOVERNMENT

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?

? Knowing Hope's church government structure, why might it be important to Hope that our associations be voluntary rather than compulsory?

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.

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

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. ² Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³ 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. ⁴ 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. ⁵ Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. ⁶ This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷ 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?

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

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?

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?