

# Church of God, The Eternal

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Dear Brethren,

In the May, 1999 *Monthly Letter*, we began an evaluation of distinct arenas of human responsibility and authority ordained of God. We noted that many of the trials we are facing in these last days are the same trials faced and failed by many in Biblical accounts. And these failures often resulted from erroneous assumptions about God-ordained authority. We also noted that God is the Author of the principle of delegation, that He is not a democrat, and that He never gives a responsibility to any individual without the complementary authority needed to fulfil that charge.

We observed that there are many commands in the Bible concerning authority, but these can easily seem confusing and contradictory. For this reason, men consistently quote selections from the Scriptures that seem to support their own ideas, whether that be advocacy for complete dictatorial rule, no authority at all, or something in between. But there is only one way to understand how to put all of these instructions into perspective, and that begins by understanding the overall fabric of God's purpose and His blueprint for human responsibility. We began by identifying four primary jurisdictions of responsibility involving human beings, or *venues of authority*. By categorizing each scriptural command into one of these venues, it becomes easier to see the beauty and harmony of that comprehensive plan. In the last letter, we looked at the first two of these venues, including personal responsibility—accountability of each individual for his/her own spiritual outcome under the laws of God, and family responsibility—including accountability of husbands, wives, parents and children. We also demonstrated there are limits to every God-given responsibility, and God has perfectly provided jurisdictional lines to prevent contradictions and confusion. For example, God instructed children to obey parents, but also delineated the boundary of that authority (Ephesians 6:1). A parent has no authority to require disobedience to one of God's commands. Given such a dilemma, personal responsibility to obey God automatically supercedes a parent's demand to the contrary. In God's perfect design there is no confusion.

In this letter we will address the third and fourth venues of authority, summarizing civil government more succinctly so that more emphasis can be given to the area of greatest contention, church government.

## **Civil Government**

What does God require of us in relation to the powers and governments of this world? We know human governments are controlled by Satan, the god of this world. But does this mean we are exempt from their authority?

Human government is a curse instituted by God, originating when Adam rebelled. God offered man the opportunity to be ruled within His glorious government according to perfect laws, but man rejected that perfect organization by committing sin (Romans 5:12–14). Of the many curses pronounced by God for this rebellion, one of the most punitive was the requirement for man to live under the rule of man for nearly six thousand years. The most important point to note is that God is still the one who subjected us to this curse, no matter how tyrannical or oppressive that rule may be. And because we are all led by the same carnal nature of defiance, this curse applied not just to Adam, but equally to each one of us.

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour (Romans 13:1–7).

Note also 1 Peter 2: 13–14. God does not condone evil or the abuse of an office of authority, but we are obligated to respect the offices God has ordained, regardless of whether the men in those offices fulfil their duties fairly or not. Those men are accountable to God for the way they discharge their responsibilities, not to us. When

Israel asked for a king, God granted their request, but warned what abuses would naturally follow 1 Samuel 8:9–18). But even after Saul abused his authority, David had respect for the office as being God-ordained, and resisted showing disrespect for the man holding it, no matter how contemptibly he behaved. This is the key principle governing our obligation to the powers of this world. Notice the example of the archangel's respect for the office Satan currently holds, in spite of the defective character of that being. "Yet Michael the archangel, when contending with the devil he disputed about the body of Moses, durst not bring against him a railing accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke thee" (Jude 9).

There should be no doubt that God is the one who not only allows, but places men into offices within this world's governments (Daniel 2:21; 4:17). Whatever these governments require of us then, even if it is oppressive, is still part of the curse God requires us to bear. The exception, however, is that civil governments also have specific jurisdictional boundaries, just like every other venue of authority. God has never condoned the encroachment of civil authorities of this world into any of the other three jurisdictions. Note an example of the apostles' decision when faced with such an encroachment.

. . . and when they had called the apostles, and beaten them, they commanded that they should not speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. And they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name. And daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ (Acts 5:40–42).

In spite of a civil directive to cease from preaching the Gospel, the apostles knew there was no authority to abrogate the commission God gave to them. Christ also spoke of this principle directly in answering a question about taxation. ". . . Then saith he unto them, Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). There is a distinct boundary that delineates every jurisdictional question. As long as a civil government is not requiring us to break God's law, we are duty-bound to comply with its demands. But as an example, what if a government required us to immunize our children to avoid civil and criminal penalties? Such is an example of a human government attempting to operate outside of its jurisdictional boundary. Such a requirement would be a violation of two God-given venues of authority. First, we are not to break the health laws by ingesting drugs and other harmful substances. This would be a violation of our personal responsibility. Secondly, God gave fathers and mothers jurisdiction over children, not civil authorities. There is no human government that can legitimately infringe on a responsibility given distinctly within that family authority.

Again we see that every question of authority can be answered by first recognizing which of the God-given jurisdictions is involved, and then knowing the limits of that particular authority.

## **Church Government**

But how did God intend church government to work? To whom did He delegate, and what was included in that delegation? Furthermore, what are the limits of that authority as it relates to relationships of ministers and laity, one with another? Such are the questions that have created the most vehement and contentious reactions among those who approach the subject with preconceived ideas. But as we were taught for years in the church, if we want to see the real truth, it requires us to put aside human reasoning and personal agendas and honestly accept what God has given for our understanding. As you will see, it all fits together harmoniously into a perfect tapestry, if we will only seek His will with a spirit of honesty and integrity.

Church government can be subdivided into three distinct domains according to the relationships of individuals composing that body. God's instructions generally address the relationship of minister to minister, minister to laity, and laymember to laymember. These relationships are central within the following key principles which define God's intent for organization within His Church:

1) God established His Church as an organized body. He is not the author of confusion. That body is the living flesh and bone of Jesus Christ, who is the spiritual head.

2) God chose to use human beings as representatives to teach His people. These chosen servants were given responsibility and corresponding authority to fulfill their mission as agents of Jesus Christ.

3) God did not ordain a hierarchical structure with ascending ranks intended to offer promotional opportunities within the ministry. Even so, He always gives responsibility for a particular task or jurisdiction to a specific servant, with authority to manage that responsibility, including the appointment of other servants to assist in that mission. There is never a commission given to servants as equal partners. One servant always has ultimate authority for a particular assignment.

4) Laymembers are given significant responsibility and accountability concerning personal conduct within the body and resolution of difficulties and problems that may arise. It is not intended for the ministry to intercede automatically to resolve personal issues between brothers.

5) As emphasized already, whatever the length and breadth of ministerial authority, it can never contradict or infringe on the authorities given by God to each chosen member, to families, or to civil governments. In the final analysis, we are each accountable for our own spiritual outcomes and families. Civil authorities and the church are entities created to help cultivate those personal successes.

In the wake of distressing trials that have occurred within the body, many have taken exception to these principles, even citing excerpts from our own literature from the early 1970s to claim we have changed our teaching on church government. This, too, is a perversion by those who are interpreting statements out of context for their own ends. Just as with Mr. Armstrong's 1939 article, our early articles were written in response to very specific problems occurring at a particular time within the body—the apostasy of our former affiliation. By focusing on some of these specific issues, we will not only prove the validity of the principles cited above, but clarify and substantiate the consistency of our teaching over these many years.

### **What Is the Church?**

Before we can understand the proper approach to church government, we must first understand how to define the church. The church is not a building, and neither is it confined to a group of people who claim membership in a particular physical group or organization. As we were taught by God's servant beginning in the early part of this century, the church is a *spiritual organism*:

And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all (Ephesians 1:19–23).

Here we find that God, the Father, gave authority to Jesus Christ to be the head of the church, and that church is His body. "For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones" (Ephesians 5:29–30). So we see also that that body is composed of flesh and bone human beings, yet their membership has nothing

to do with the physical. "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).

Acts 20:28 tells us that church was purchased with the shed blood of Jesus Christ. What then was it that He purchased with His blood? It certainly was not something physical like a building, or even a physical organization of human beings who claim membership. Legitimate membership in that body requires an individual to be called, to accept Jesus Christ completely, and then through baptism to be granted the gift of the Holy Spirit, through which a spiritual begetting takes place. What Christ purchased with His blood was each called individual who made that life-changing sacrifice. Those who are truly a part of that body are each nourished by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me" (John 15:4). The members of His body, the church, are those who have the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit. "But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his" (Romans 8:9).

Can you then understand why we have never put a fence around ourselves to claim this small remnant group constitutes the church in its entirety? We cannot know where all those people are whom God claims as His own, and in whom dwells His Holy Spirit. But likewise, this means all individuals who are part of a physical assembly being taught by faithful ministers of Jesus Christ are not necessarily part of that church either. If the church is a spiritual organism, and possession of the Holy Spirit is a true member's calling card, then mere physical association week after week is not sufficient to claim membership. Remember that God's people have often been found physically within a mixed multitude. But the church which Christ will marry at His return will include only those who are members indeed. "That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:27).

Be careful in assuming this definition of the church gives license for us to choose to serve God separately from any organized group. It does not! Keeping God's laws involves weekly and annual Sabbaths which are *holy convocations*. Sabbath-keeping is the sign between God and His people (Exodus 31:13) and Sabbaths can never be properly kept alone. The day is coming when God will gather together all of His people into one harmonious assembly. In the meantime, anyone who purposely avoids assembly with those they know are keeping and teaching that original revelation are accountable before God.

God also chose to teach His people through human servants in whom He works. This is point number two from the principles listed above. "For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21). He could have chosen to teach each one of us independently and directly, but He did not. Notice also Romans 10:14–15. Can we begin to see then why organization of a physical nature was ordained among God's people? How could God possibly use human servants to teach, and do so within weekly and annual convocations if there were no structure or organization? Such would be totally unacceptable to the disciplined and ordered mind of God.

### **Ministerial Accountability**

What about point number three concerning specific accountability and jurisdiction of particular servants? Some have claimed our early writings make the case for equal partnership within the ministry, arguing against final accountability with any one individual. But is this accurate? Let us examine more closely.

The first error in reasoning is to assume that if God did not ordain a pecking-order hierarchy, then the opposite extreme must be true, that all ordained ministers must automatically be equals with no one given ultimate authority for any jurisdiction. The following quotations from our 1976 article, *How Should God's Church Be Governed?*, have been cited to try and make this erroneous point:

"Peter was a 'pillar,' but he was not the head of the entire church! He was one of a group of apostles given authority by Christ to function as a team."

"... it is clear from Paul's statements in Galatians 2 that James was not the head of the church. There was no physical head."

"Decisions were never unilateral (made by one man) and always had the best interests of the people in mind."

All of these statements are absolutely true, but at the same time they in no way contradict the concept of God-given accountability to specific servants over specific jurisdictions. First, there is no direct evidence there was a single apostle given supreme authority over the work of every other apostle. We know that the gospel to the Gentiles under Paul was separate from that of the Twelve to Israel. This, therefore, automatically rules out a single physical head of the church. As quoted above, there is also no direct Biblical evidence that the Twelve were specifically under

the jurisdiction of one of the other apostles. Yet, what was not emphasized in this particular article is the fact Peter and Paul were given some unique authority that the others were not.

"But contrariwise, when they saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as the gospel of the circumcision was unto Peter; (For he that wrought effectually in Peter to the apostleship of the circumcision, the same was mighty in me toward the Gentiles" (Galatians 2:7–8).

This statement by Paul proves there was something unique and more expansive about the commissions of Paul and Peter. Whatever Paul's authority over the gospel to the uncircumcision included, Peter held the very same authority over the gospel of the circumcision, which automatically involved the jurisdictions assigned to the other apostles in some way. God did not tell us what the scope of that special authority was. But to attempt to claim Peter had no unique authority that the others did not is to ignore clear scriptural evidence. Remember, the purpose of our articles in the mid-1970s was to counter the blatant hierarchical structure that had been fostered and defended in our former affiliation, operating as a heavy-handed, dictatorial regime. This is not of God.

Teamwork, consensus, and mutual agreement were all fruits of the interaction between the apostles. But does this automatically mean the apostles must have been full equal partners in a democratic governmental union? In the last letter we addressed this same false concept concerning marriage, and the true roles of husband and wife. The husband was given clear and definitive authority over the wife, directly comparable to the relationship of Christ and the church (Ephesians 5:23). Does this relationship of authority preclude the possibility of unity, mutual agreement, and a spirit of harmony and cooperation between a man and woman? Obviously not! A successful marriage requires this kind of cooperation and mutual concern, even though a direct relationship of authority exists simultaneously. Because the Scriptures show that decisions among the apostles were made by mutual agreement and unanimity of mind, does this prove there was no possibility of a relationship of authority among them? Only if the same can be said of marriage. God did not give us details to know the full picture. Notice one of the quotations made in this same 1976 article from the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*: "Indeed there appear to have been many degrees of ministry in the infant church . . . For this reason, while the different persons who composed the body of Christian ministers did not overlap or infringe on each other's work, yet the relative rank or priority of each *minister was not clearly defined.*" (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, art. "Bishop").

The Bible emphasizes each of these apostles had their own unique commission and assigned jurisdiction; Paul to the Gentiles, and the Twelve to Israel, including Judaea and the lost ten tribes. "These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:5–6). The Scriptures emphasize the commissions given with equal authority to each apostle, rather than the organization that existed among themselves when together. This makes sense, because each was assigned to oversee his own separate far-flung jurisdiction in preaching the gospel and raising up churches. Because of the difficulty of travel and communication, each apostle had to be capable of making decisions independently. Regular coordination with other apostles would have been impossible, even if desired. God obviously selected men who were capable of carrying this weight of responsibility. We also know God intended each of these men to tend to their own regions without overlap. "Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation" (Romans 15:20). Apostles did not compete with one another for the same disciples. Those who seek to justify the acceptability of two separate ministries trying to serve the very same people would do well to take note of this point. In such case, both cannot be approved of God.

What *is* known, and what is clearly stated in our past articles is that very specific authority was vested to supervise and administer the needs of local congregations under each apostle. The ministry, the *diakonate*, was the tool ordained of God for the apostles to provide local leadership and assure order within the body in each of their jurisdictions. This included all of those who may have been selected to perform a particular function, whether as an evangelist, a pastor, a teacher, or any other specific office.

"And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:11–13).

The intent of this letter is not to rehearse the extensive technical delineations between these offices, but to emphasize that very definite authority was given to apostles and they in turn delegated to others within a very organized structure (Titus 1:5). One ordained by an apostle was accountable to that apostle for whatever duties delegated. In turn, one ordained of an evangelist remained accountable to that servant. Such ministers never became equal after ordination, with "voting rights." Again, all

of those servants led by the Holy Spirit worked together with mutual respect, giving deference to one another for the benefit of the work. But each apostle still held vested responsibility given by God for his jurisdiction, and was ultimately accountable for that commission. God never intended for the process of ordaining helpers to create a democratic congress and undermine the primary servant's ultimate decision-making ability. Such is an argument for chaos and confusion.

In Ephesians 4:13, how long was that structure among God's people to exist? Until we achieve perfection in the fulness of Christ, which will not occur before His Second Coming. What were these commissioned servants told to do?

"I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (2 Timothy 4:1–2).

### **What About Church Government Today?**

We have seen that apostles had unique jurisdictions, but that within a particular jurisdiction there was delegation to ministers who were accountable to other ministers. This was not a hierarchy or a rank system offering a pecking order for ladder-climbers. There were no ladders to climb. Each was commissioned for a particular purpose and worked in that specific capacity for the edification of the body. But what about today? With all that has occurred within the church of the last days, and the divisions that have occurred one after another, what should we be doing?

First and foremost, where is the Truth being preached—that original revelation of Jesus Christ given through a commissioned servant? The only organized ministry we know of who has continued to teach the unadulterated truth is this very ministry. All others have either compromised the doctrine in some way, arrogated authority to themselves that God never gave, or both. Then, within this remnant of God's people, how should we be organized?

The answer lies in recognizing that our fledgling group, although composed of brethren scattered around the world, resembles much more a single jurisdiction, subject to the structure ordained for local congregations within one dominion. Why? As we have already seen above, those jurisdictions were always associated with a specific servant who God charged to support and serve a particular group of brethren. Ministers never had overlapping territories which competed with one another. Across

the United States, the Church of God, the Eternal is composed of brethren all being served by one ministry, even though scattered in separate geographic regions. It certainly cannot be compared to separate apostolic jurisdictions, that were each headed by separate apostles and ministers assigned to totally different local churches. Even though we are scattered, we are all served by the very same servant, receiving sermons by tape, and being visited personally by that very minister. We have no local ministers in each city who tend separate flocks. All other ministers associated with us in the past have been there to help support the needs of the *very same* group of people. Therefore, ministers in a supporting role, serving the same members, cannot claim to be "equal" in responsibility. Such is absurd, since they do not have their own separate God-ordained jurisdictions. If a group of men are serving the same body, there must be authority vested in one of them with ultimate accountability for that particular jurisdiction. This is not an argument for a single person having charge over "the whole church." Read again from above what we found actually defines the entire church.

But this particular remnant exists by God's will through the ministry of a single servant who stood faithful when the parent body departed from the truth in the 1970s. All who are members of this remnant, including those ministers and members in Europe and the Philippines, are still being served and supported by that very same servant. In each of these worldwide congregations, it is the faithful example of that one evangelist who helped keep us grounded in God's Truth when all others were destroying their spiritual foundation. The advances in communication and travel technology have now made it possible for a single ministry to serve scattered brethren around the world. This would never have been possible in the early church, so the emphasis then was always on local geographical congregations who each had separate local ministers to teach them. Even though our ministry spans the world today, it is still a single jurisdiction, comparable to one of those given by an apostle to a specific evangelist. Notice Paul's delegation to the evangelist, Titus (Titus 1:5).

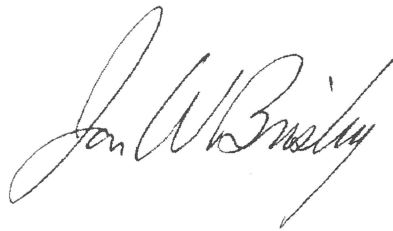
In fact, that faithful servant today is precisely such an evangelist, continuing to carry out the very same mission and purpose first delegated to him by Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong more than fifty years ago. Those ministers who came months and years later to assist in service to this particular remnant were never commissioned to share "democratic" authority. Those who have arrogated such authority to themselves, even though the original doctrine continues to be preached faithfully by that original evangelist, make a mockery of God's authority. The only justification for a separation is a departure from truth. Any other reason, no matter how emotional the appeal, is the act of a deceptive counterfeit. Instead, such men would do well to note the organization God *did* intend when ministers of varying orders were chosen to help

serve the same brethren in a single jurisdiction. God always delegates a responsibility with the authority to fulfill that particular mission. Those attempting to quote from our own literature to support the concept of democracy in the ministry should read again our article entitled, *Church Organization and Administration—What Is the Truth?*, also written in 1976.

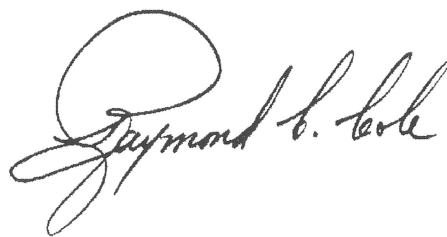
This brings us through the first three of five principles concerning church government. In a future letter, we will address the final two principles, including the responsibilities given to laymembers within the body, the delineation between the laity and ministry in resolving problems, and then a summary to understand how church government is intended to interface perfectly with the other three venues of authority ordained of God. When all of these pieces can be understood in relation to one another, it bespeaks the incredible wisdom of our Heavenly Father in creating a perfect training ground for the perfecting of future members of His own God-family.

With love and respect for God's faithful in these perilous last days,

Your devoted brother,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

Jon W. Brisby

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Raymond C. Cole". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial "R" and a long, sweeping underline.

Raymond C. Cole