

September 2018

The Role of Elders in Theocratic Government



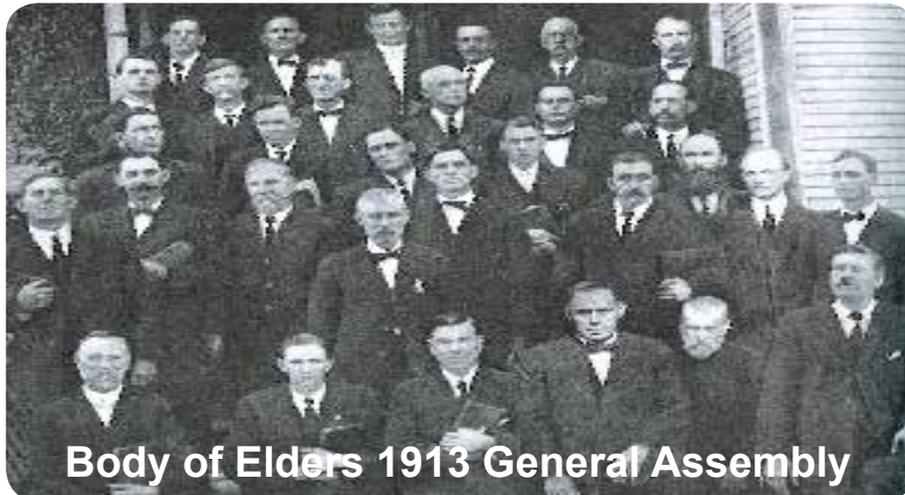
R.G. Spurling
1857-1935
Chief leader
(1886-1903)



A. J. Tomlinson
1865-1943
General Overseer
(1903-1943)



M.A. Tomlinson
1906-1995
General Overseer
(1943-1990)



Body of Elders 1913 General Assembly



Billy D. Murray, Sr.
1930-2005
General Overseer
(1990-2000)

During Bishop Murray's tenure as general overseer, a spirit of error began to trouble the church and to create confusion and disorder. Then, during the oversight of Fred S. Fisher Sr., who had been selected to succeed Murray in the church's highest office in September 2000, the church's doctrine, government and discipline was more plainly and seriously compromised and corrupted. This state of affairs necessitated a special-called meeting on April 18-20, 2004 that resulted in the restoration and reorganization of the church under a new administration. Bishop Phillips was selected on April 20th to serve as presiding bishop in the new order.



Wade H. Phillips
1946--
Presiding Bishop
(2004 to present)

God-Ordained Church Government: Understanding and Implementing Theocracy

Our readers will receive this edition of the *Voice of Zion* about the time the gavel comes down to open the 15th Annual Assembly on September 4th. We have focused on the importance of the General Assembly as a divine institution, holding that the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 is a pattern for the church to follow by each succeeding generation. A message by former General Overseer, M. A. Tomlinson, focuses on the strategic importance of this special annual meeting; namely, that the General Assembly is the church's "highest tribunal of authority on earth for the interpretation of the Scriptures". The ministers and members agree together in this sacred meeting to walk by the same rule of faith, government, and discipline: and to labor together to fulfill the church's mission in the world (Acts 15.22-28; 16.4-5; 1 Cor. 1.10; 12.12-28; Phil. 3.16; see also Mt. 16.18-20; 18.18-20; et al.). These principles and obligations are implicit in our church covenant, which every member commits to when he/she unites with the church.

Section V of the Presiding Bishop's annual address to the 15th Annual Assembly is being published in this issue and will be read to the Assembly about the same time that our subscribers at home are reading it. It focuses on the whole structure and process of "theocratic government" in the church, with a special emphasis on the office or position of Presiding Bishop. We are still seeking to more perfectly understand this special office or position for the benefit of the whole church and the one called and anointed to serve in this sacred capacity.

Many of our ministers and members will not be able to attend this General Assembly for a variety of reasons. Still, however, all can participate by joining in prayer throughout the week (September 4-9) and watching this glorious event online *via* live-streaming; which will be accessible from our website at www.zionassemblychurchofgod.com. Also, the pastors should have posted a copy of the Assembly program in a prominent place, so everyone could be informed and able to keep abreast with each day's activities.

October World Mission Drive

We call our special efforts to raise mission funds each March and October as "drives." This term lays emphasis on the fact that we must press and push against indifference, worldly preoccupations, demonic forces, and frankly in some cases a propensity toward laziness. We all therefore should be driven to excel in this great and noble cause---to raise funds to help support our missionaries and overseers to reach out to lost souls and "other sheep" in their respective nations: so that they might transform sinners into saints and plant Zion Assembly congregations in every city and community. I feel aroused in my spirit as I write these lines to boost this glorious enterprise.

We have good cause to be driven in Zion Assembly and to drive others. For we have a special message for the world---a deeper and fuller message; one packed with true holiness and classical Pentecostal principles in salvation; and a revelation and commission to labor together for Christian union, to encourage and warn believers of their obligation to come together into "one fold"---in one visible body of Christ (Jn 10.16; 11.49-52; Eph. 1.10; 2.14-19; 3.6; 4.4-16; 5.27; see also Is. 60.1-5; et al).

Further, we have a revelation of the prophetic scenario of end-time events and of ourselves as God's church participating in the redemption of the world: for as Paul says,

"But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write to you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night . . . But ye, brethren, are not in darkness that that day should overtake you as a thief . . . [for] we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore, let us not sleep as do others; but let us watch and be sober" (1 Thess. 5.1-6).

And again,

"According as [God the Father] hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace . . . In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins . . . Wherein he hath abounded toward us in all wisdom and prudence; Having made known unto us the mystery of his will . . ." (Eph. 1.3-9).

Let us therefore, brethren, shake ourselves and set our hands to the plow, setting our eyes steadfastly on the mark that is before us; let us encourage and drive one another furiously toward the goal, lest we fall short of our Lord's expectations. We read of the marvelous accomplishment of the people of God under Nehemiah's inspirational leadership. The wall of the holy city was raised in "fifty-two days." How so? *"For the people had a mind to work"* (Neh. 4.6). Recall the words of our Lord: *"I must work . . . while it is day: the night cometh when no man can work"* (Jn. 9.4).

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The *Voice of Zion* is the official publication of Zion Assembly Church of God. The purpose of the paper is to provide a channel through which the inspiration of the Spirit can flow to and from the field; to evangelize the lost; to disciple believers; to feed and nourish the church in the Word of God; to enhance fellowship between the members and ministers throughout the world.

“And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all” - - - Jesus



Wade H. Phillips

God-Ordained Church Government

Understanding and Implementing Theocracy

The term “theocratic government” became a popular expression among our forefathers in the early 1900s. It was defined in those days as “government under the immediate direction of God.” But gradually the church understood *theocracy* as meaning God mediating His government indirectly through “Spirit-filled men.” In fact, gradually this latter idea became the prevailing view. To capture this meaning, I have explained the word “church” to mean “God’s instrumental government” on earth. But the fact is God works both ways---directly through the Spirit and indirectly through God-ordained and duly-appointed men. But in the normal course of theocratic administration and operations, God works instrumentally through the church to establish His truth and will on earth. I will give a few examples of both methods in a moment.

Regarding the word, *ekklesia*

The very term that Jesus used in Matthew 16.18 and 18.17, which is translated “church” in most of our English versions, comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*. This word means literally “called out,” but it implies being called out of the kingdom of God, not out of the world: and more to the point it means being called out of one’s privacy or individualism into a duly-called and orderly assembly to transact business (note how the word *ekklesia* is used to identify the governing secular assembly in the city of Ephesus in Acts 19.32, 39, 41). Thus, regarding God’s *ekklesia* [“church”] the word indicates the “many members” of Christ’s body being called together, in divine order, to participate together in the decision-making process of the church. Accordingly, it may be seen that one is not automatically a member of the church through the new birth; rather he joins and thus is “added” to the church by covenant subsequently to being born-again by the Spirit into the kingdom of God (Lu. 17.20-21; Jn. 3.3-8; Col. 1.13; Acts 2.41; also cp. Ex. 19.5-8 and 24.3-4, 7-8 with Jn. 17.6,8, 14 and 1 Pet. 2.9). Thus, the apostle says to the Corinthian believers, “*I have espoused you to one husband*” (2

Cor. 11.2), and the prophet wrote, “*For as a young man [marries] a virgin, so shall thy sons marry thee: and as a bridegroom [rejoices] over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee*” (Is. 62.5; see also Ex. 19.5-8; Jer. 50.5; Ezek. 16.8; Eph. 5.29-32; et al).

The visible and corporate nature of the church is thus plainly distinguished from the invisible, mystical nature of the kingdom of God (Lu.17.20-21; Col. 1.13), the former being the assembled body of Christ authorized to transact business on earth in His name (Mt.16.19-20; Mt.18.15-20; Rom. 16.17). Accordingly, theocratic government cannot be practiced properly and fully in the spiritual and mystical realm of the kingdom of God: for it is impossible to practice corporate discipline, corporate decision-making, and to fulfill the corporate mission of the church where there is no mutual covenant and agreement between believers regarding doctrine and polity.

Acting *for* and *with* Christ

The church then is literally a “corporation” [body] of believers duly called-out and ordained by the Lord to do business for Him---to transact in the earth what He has bound and loosed in heaven (Mt. 16.19; 18.15-20; Jn. 20.23; Acts 15.1-16.5). This is precisely the meaning in Jesus’ parable in Lu. 19.12-27. The phrase “*Occupy till I come*” in v. 13 literally means “Carry on My trade or business until I return.” Paul even went so far to say that, in view of Jesus’ ascension to the Father, the church now prays and acts in “*Christ’s stead*” (2 Cor. 5.20). Further, the church is the final arbiter in the interpretation of Scripture and disciplinary issues (Mt. 18.15-20; Acts 15.1-16.5; 1 Tim. 3.15). It is in this sense that the church is called *Bethel* [“house of God”] and therefore should be considered a “*dreadful place*” and the “*gate of heaven*” (Gen. 28.17-19). Our illustrious forefathers understood the church literally to be “God’s government for His people”, and they fellowshipped and practiced their faith and churchmanship on this basis.

Direct and Instrumental Divine Intervention

A few passages that illustrate the church as God's instrumental government are Mk. 13.34; Lu. 19.12-27; Acts 6.1-7; 15.1-16.5; 1 Cor. 3.8-15; 4.1-2; 5.1-13; 6.1-4. In fact, we see Spirit-filled men ruling for Christ in and through the church everywhere in the Scriptures, under both Old and New Covenants; and the prophetic vision of the church reveals that Christ will continue to use the church instrumentally to rule and reign with Him throughout the Millennial Kingdom on earth (Rev. 20.4-7; see also Dan. 7.18, 22, 27; Mt. 19.28; Lu. 22.30; 1 Cor. 6.2-3; 2 Tim. 2.12; Rev. 5.10). Still, we see that on occasion it was necessary for the Lord to break in directly on the church to establish His will and purpose: for the church is sometimes slow to grasp the mind and will of Christ and the "higher things" of God, and unable also to immediately foresee or understand the prophetic future. Thus, in some instances, the Lord acts directly to establish His will. We see this, for example, in God writing with His "finger" the Ten Commandments (Ex. 31.18; Deut. 9.10-11); in intervening miraculously to rain down bread from heaven; in appearing in dreams and visions; and in leading and guiding the church through gifts and operations of the Holy Spirit (Acts 9.15-16; 13.2, 4; 22.17-21; Rom. 1.1; Gal. 1.15-16; et al). Simply put, in some instances God acts directly and unilaterally, which is His prerogative. It was with this understanding that the old mountain preacher told a young seminary student who was attempting to explain an incomprehensible mystery about the inner workings of the Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost): "Son, you are whittling on the wrong end of the stick"--a mild way of reproofing him for his arrogance and insolence: for some things are too high and lofty for us, and must remain hidden in God's infinite counsel and judgment (Job 11.7-12; Eccl. 3.11; Rom. 11.33-34).

A classic case in the New Testament of God's direct intervention was His call and conversion of Saul of Tarsus, who became our apostle Paul (see Gal. 1.11-17; 2.1-3; Eph. 3.1-11; 1 Tim. 1.12-16). It seemed irrational and obscene or repulsive to the church to use such a man in the ministry, and indeed, more especially that he should be ordained an apostle--a man that had proven himself to be a blasphemer and great persecutor of the church; one that had used all of his powers to "[make] havoc of the church" and "beyond measure [to persecute . . . and waste it]" (Acts 8.1-3; 9.1-2, 13-14, 21, 26; Gal. 1.21-24; 1 Tim. 1.12-16). The mothers and fathers and siblings of those to whom Paul was now appointed to oversee were very likely among the casualties that he had

had killed or imprisoned and scattered. The disciple Ananias of Damascus thus hesitated, if not protested, against the revelation that God intended to use Saul in the ministry, especially in the elevated office of apostle. The simple conclusion by the Lord, however, was "*Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto Me, to bear My name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel*" (Acts 9.15). This direct intervention of God was pure and simple theocratic government--- God acting unilaterally to fulfill His will and purpose in the church.

Notwithstanding God's direct intervention in governing the church, it may be noticed that even in the case of Saul (Paul) there was in the final analysis the instrumental use of Ananias and Barnabas and others in getting him established in the church and accepted by the leadership in Jerusalem (Acts 9.10-19, 27-30; Gal. 1.18, 22-24; 2.9-10).

Dignity of Every Member in the Decision-Making Process

Now we are well versed in Zion Assembly that God's church is not ultimately ruled by an episcopate, that is, a body or college of bishops; but rather every male member in good standing is part of the decision-making process (female members contribute also through prayer and through their husbands and elders). The dignity of each member in this respect is based on the fact that every member is potentially filled with the Holy Spirit, who is given to "*teach [us] all things . . . and guide [us] into all truth*" (Jn. 14.26; 15.26-27; 16.13-15; cf. also Zech. 4.6); and we see in the council at Jerusalem in Acts 15 that the "*whole church*" participated in the discussions and contributed to the outcome (vv. 1-3, 12, 22, 25, 28, 30-31; see also Prov. 11.14; 15.22; 24.6).

What is clear and inarguable is that theocratic government now rests with God's church, and in fact identifies the true church. Christ is indeed the head of the church, and the Father is the head of Christ: but after Jesus came to earth and established the church and purchased it with His own blood (Mk. 3.13-16; Lu. 6.12-17; Acts 20.28; see also Mt. 16.18-19; 18.15-20; et al.), He ascended back to the Father and left His government with His church in this world (Mt. 5.13-14; Mk. 13.34). The prophecy of Christ in Is. 9.6-7, particularly the phrase "*. . . and the government shall be upon His shoulder*", should be understood to mean that the government of Christ is now with His body, the church (see Is. 2.2-4; 25.6-7; Mic. 4.1-3; et al). It will be observed that the word *mountain* is often used as a metaphor for "government", as is the case in the passages just cited. We hold therefore that "the

highest tribunal of authority in the church on earth is the General Assembly.”

God-called and Anointed Leaders in the Theocratic Process

But again, notwithstanding the dignity of every member of the church and the privilege of everyone to participate and to contribute potentially in the decision-making process, the rulership of the church remains principally in the hands of divinely-called and anointed elders; for, significantly, after the foundation of the church was laid by the apostles who had been directly appointed by Christ (Lu. 6.13; Acts 1.14-26; 2.42; 6.1-7; 15.1-16.5; Eph. 2.20; et al), and after these apostles had passed off the scene of action in the first century, the church was ruled by presbyters or elders, and it remains so today (Acts 11.29-30; 14.23; 15.2, 4, 22, 25-28; 20.17-18, 28; 16.4; 21.18; 24.1; 1 Cor. 12.28; 1 Eph. 4.11; Tim. 3.1-7; 4.14-16; 5.17-19; Titus 1.5-7; Heb. 13.7, 17, 24; Jas. 5.14; 1 Pet. 5.1-2).

Further, among these elders there are “*chief men*” (Acts 15.22). We see clear evidence of this in the Jerusalem council in Acts 15; such were Peter (vv. 7-11); Paul and Barnabas (v. 12); and preeminently James, the Lord’s brother (vv. 13-21). And we might add Judas and Silas who are named as “*chief men among the brethren*”. This Judas may have been the brother of Joseph Barsabas who had given way to Matthias as the successor to Judas Iscariot in the apostolic band (Acts 1.21-26), though a few scholars believe he may have been the younger brother of Jesus and James, and the author of the epistle that bears his name (cf. Mt. 13.55; Mk. 6.3; 1 Cor. 9.5; Acts 1.13-14, 23; Jude 1.1). In any case, these leading elders were appointed to return with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch to report by mouth as well as by letter from the apostles and elders regarding the resolutions [dogmas, “decrees”] adopted at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15.22-27; 16.4-5).

The prominence of elders in the theocratic process is a carry-over from the Old Testament into the New Testament church. We read of the “*chief fathers of the congregation*” (Numb. 31.26), and the “*chief fathers*” of the Levites (1 Chron. 9.34), and the “*chief*

fathers” of the priests (24.31). King David appointed 2700 “*chief fathers*” and made them “*rulers*” over the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh for “*every matter unto God . . .*” (1 Chron. 26.32). Likewise, we see in the restoration of the house of God following the Babylonian Captivity under Ezra and Zerubbabel that the government and work of God went forward under the oversight of elders (Ezra 5.10; 6.7; 7.28).

It is of paramount importance therefore to maintain our esteem for leadership in the church, especially elders in prominent positions, and to “*know them*” [i.e., give them due recognition] which labor

“It is of paramount importance therefore to maintain our esteem for leadership in the church, especially elders in prominent positions, and to “know them” [i.e., give them due recognition] which labor among us, and ‘to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake’ (1 Thess. 5.12-13), rendering also to all their needs (cf. 1 Cor. 9.9-14; 1 Tim. 5.17-19; see also 1 Cor. 16.15-18; Phil. 2. 25-30; Heb. 13.7, 17; et al). This does not mean that leaders cannot or will not fail on occasion; in fact, it is inevitable that some will stumble and disappoint us; and some will fall grievously into perdition.”

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Iscariot, Demas, Diotrophes, Philetus, Hymenaeus, and others who once labored with the apostles. Jesus and the apostles were careful in fact to warn us of this inevitability. “*Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall*” (1 Cor. 10.12). Jesus said, “*it must needs be that offenses come; but woe unto that man by whom the offence cometh.*” And the apostle Paul warned that “. . . *there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you*” (1 Cor. 11.19). Thus, we are admonished by the writer of Hebrews that in order to remain God’s house we must “. . . *hold fast [our] confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end*” (Heb. 3.6); and again,

“Cast not away therefore your confidence . . . For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him” (10.35-38).

“Church Fathers”

There are those among us whom we esteem as “fathers” in the church. These ministers are indeed peculiar or special and “worthy of double honor”: for as Paul says in another place, “*For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel*” (1 Cor. 4.15). Seeing himself in this role, he boldly admonished the believers to follow and pattern their life after him as a father in the church (v. 16; 11.1; Phil. 3.17; 1 Thess. 1.6; 2 Thess. 3.9). Paul’s words here elevate the church above that of a common institution or denomination to a house or “habitation of God through the Spirit” (Eph. 2.22), a point that we will elaborate upon further in a moment.

A *father* then is one who has begotten or given birth to many of the believers in the church; and has labored to establish and nourish ministers and local churches. Then, among these “fathers” are a few who have ministered to and built up the church universally. Such was the apostle Paul and other apostles and elders. In church history they are therefore called “Church Fathers.” It was thus that the apostle Paul could say to the Corinthians believers, “*I have begotten you through the Gospel,*” and to the Galatians, “*My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you*” (Gal. 4.19); and yet again while in prison he claims to have “*begotten*” Onesimus in the Lord and refers to him as his “*son*” (Phile. 1.10).

This was the special kind of spiritual bond that Paul and other elders in the church had formed with the members of Christ’s body. They saw themselves as “shepherds” and the believers as “sheep,” but more intimately they saw themselves as “fathers” and the saints as “children”---“sons” and “daughters” (cf. 2 Cor. 6.13; 1 Thess. 2.11; 2 Jn. 1, 4; 3 Jn. 4): for they had mediated on earth the “new birth” experience in them from above. And even after giving birth to these “children”, the apostle Paul relates further his relationship with them in terms of a deep inner affection, saying, “. . . *how greatly I long after you all in the bowels of Jesus Christ*” (Phil. 1.8), and he uses this same imagery elsewhere (cf. Col. 2.19; 3.12; Phile. 7, 12; et al). Still further, he reminds the saints in Thessalonica that “*as the apostles of Christ . . . we*

were gentle among you, even as a nurse [cherishes] her children. So being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted to you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us” (1 Thess. 2.6-8).

Now this is the crux of the matter, brethren: it is only in the context of a spiritual bonding and intimacy with Christ and one another that actual *theocracy* can be realized and work. Christ is the head of the church and the savior of the body, to be sure, but He mediates His headship in the church in and through the Holy Spirit and His ministers: and He can only do this in proportion to the depth of spirituality and maturity that we have in our fellowship. Otherwise we function no better than a common denomination. So, let us heed the words and admonition of the great apostle in Eph. 2.18-22:

“For through him we both [that is, Jew and Gentile believers in covenant fellowship in one house] have access by one Spirit unto the Father. Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together growth unto an holy temple in the Lord. In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.”

Office of Presiding Bishop

One final point on this important subject---on the proper function of theocratic government. It has become a settled point among us that there is a hierarchy of executive authority in the church which culminates in a “chief” or a “first among equals” in the divine order of administrative authority. Paul in fact recognized a hierarchy of influence and status even among the apostles, saying on more than one occasion he was not “*a whit behind the very chiefest apostles*” (2 Cor. 11.5; 12.11). And this point is further supported by the obvious elevated stature of James [the Lord’s brother], and Peter and John among the leaders of the apostolic church (Gal. 2.9). Further, James stands

South Carolina/North Carolina Camp



Sixty campers and twenty-eight staff from the Carolina attended youth camp this year in Batesburg, South Carolina, on July 23-27. Our theme was “Fun in the SON.” Campers enjoyed a week of classes, worship services, games, singing, swimming, and an old-fashion, southern “pig-pickin” on the last night. Brother Allen Thompson from Columbus, Mississippi served as our camp evangelist and Brother Trevor Graves traveled from Kentucky to lead worship and teach our music class. The Lord moved mightily in our services each night; the altars were filled with young people seeking the Lord, and allowing Him to work in their lives. On the last night of camp one camper prayed fervently for nearly two hours while staff and campers prayed with him until he prayed through to salvation! The Lord poured out His Spirit on our campers and staff; 23 testified to being saved. On the last night of camp, 13 were baptized.

We continue to thank the Lord for the wonderful work He did at our youth camp this year. We’re already looking forward to what He has in-store for our camp ministry in 2019!

---Katie Busbee, *reporter*

Camp Hosanna



Camp Hosanna convened in beautiful Fayetteville, West Virginia June 25-29. We had a wonderful time! The Lord blessed us with His awesome Spirit, great fellowship, and a lot of fun. There was a total of 80 in camp. Many were saved and rejoiced for all that the Lord had done.

Our theme this year was taken from Psalm 51, *“Create in me a clean heart, O God.”* The classes focused on different aspects of having a “clean heart,” especially getting to know who Jesus is. Oftentimes, we focus too much on our works and not enough on knowing Jesus. Each year we have several kids come to camp who are unchurched. It’s wonderful to watch them “come to the knowledge of Christ.”

Next year, we will convene camp June 24-28, 2019 at the same site (Fayette County Park). We are setting a goal of having 100 in camp next year. If you are in the Mid-East region, please make plans to attend. With your help, we can reach this goal. Your faithfulness in praying, fund-raising, and inviting are greatly appreciated.

---J. J. Davis, *reporter*

WHAT IS THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY?

Every Member Should Respect This August Body

M.A. Tomlinson

This lengthy excerpt from Bishop M.A. Tomlinson's August 1969 message is offered here to help solidify our current vision and practices in regard to the General Assembly and our decision-making process in the church.

As the Annual Assembly draws near, I would like to extend a very special invitation and welcome to every member to attend. Of course, I realize that it is hardly possible for all to leave their homes at the same time and to spend a week in the vicinity of the church's World Headquarters, but those who can come are welcome. It is probable that some who could come will fail to make the necessary effort and arrangements, while many others who have a sincere desire to attend will have to submit to hindering conditions. It is possible that some do not realize the importance of the General Assembly. They think of it as simply a customary

annual meeting, held because most religious organizations have them. But this is not the purpose of the General Assembly of the Church of God.

God has committed to the church the responsibility to keep the unity of the faith; to build a house into which all His scattered sheep may gather in these last days when Bible doctrine is being compromised and disrespected by so many. His sheep will hear His voice, and there will be one fold and one Shepherd. The one fold is the Church of God, and Jesus is the one Shepherd. The Good Shepherd loves His sheep, and He will not tolerate false and dangerous doctrine in His fold. The doctrine is kept pure by the General Assembly which, in session, consists in the General Overseer and all the delegates in attendance from the various local churches throughout the world. Every member of the church may attend, and all male ministers and members have a voice in the Assembly in arriving at proper interpretations of the Scriptures and determining the practices by which the ministry and membership are to be governed.

In saying that the General Assembly is the highest tribunal of authority for the interpretation of the Scriptures,

we are saying that every member has a part. That is considered safe in view of the Scriptural declaration, "In the multitude of counselors there is safety." Some have failed to see how that every member has a part because of the committee work which must be done before matters are brought to the multitude for decision. But this should not be hard to understand when we consider that it would be utterly impossible for every one of our thousands of members to have the necessary knowledge of every need and every condition in every field. Neither would every member be endowed with sufficient Scriptural knowledge to

offer solutions to every problem, or to rightly divide the Word of truth. To bring every matter directly to the floor would mean confusion rather than unity.

The Bible pattern is very clear. And who would say that it is not safe to follow? Some might contend that the Jerusalem gathering recorded in the fifteenth chapter of Acts was not a General Assembly because it resulted from one particular problem which arose in the local

church at Antioch. That is was a general gathering is clear from the fact that a multitude participated. And it is not likely that the local church at Jerusalem would have taken care of the business of the local church at Antioch.

Acts 15:2 says: "When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question." This is no different than saying, as we do today, "This point of doctrine has not been settled by the church, and since there is division over it, let us take it to the General Assembly for settlement."

When Paul and Barnabas reached Jerusalem, some of the members who had been Pharisees under the old order contended with them, so the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter. After it had been disputed pro and con, and the workings of God had been made known by those who had experienced them, the problem was brought before the multitude. It was not settled in a closed council, or committee meeting. "Then all the multitude kept silence, and gave audience to Barnabas and Paul ..."

When the discussion had ended, James, the General Overseer, summarized the matter, showing the agreement of the Scripture on the proper side of the issue. Then he gave his sentence. That it was accepted by the whole church is clear from verse 22: "Then pleased it the apostles and elders with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas..." It is further shown that letters were sent by them, not just to Antioch, but also Syria and Cilicia, indicating that the division had already begun to spread.

Then we find that wonderful verse which holds the secret of the manner of settlement: "For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us..." This shows that the Holy Ghost was working in their midst, and that He was recognized and revered.

Now, let us notice the reaction of the people in the local churches to the Assembly's decision. "...When they had gathered the multitude together, they delivered the epistle: Which when they had read, they rejoiced for the consolation." (verses 30,31) Antioch was not the only church affected by the Assembly's decisions. Paul and Silas delivered the decrees "in every city where they had preached the word of the Lord" (Acts 15:36). Notice the results: "And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem. And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily" (Acts 16:4,5).

Transportation and communication in that early day were not like they are today. It would have been almost impossible for the members to travel thousands of miles to Headquarters in large numbers as they do now. Neither could a general mailing of the minutes, or decrees, be made as can be done today. But it seems that no pains were spared in order to deliver the decrees, in order that the unity of the faith might be preserved.

A large attendance in our Assemblies, with people from as many states and countries as possible, helps the church world-wide to know the spirit accompanying the discussions and the decisions made. People are better satisfied when they can feel the Spirit directing the business and see in action the unanimous agreement which is reached before a recommendation is counted acceptable. But it is important that all the members in all the local churches have confidence in the Assembly, and that they respect and

honor the decrees as set forth. They should "rejoice for the consolation," because the interpretation of the doctrine, and the practices recommended to carry out the work are not left to every private interpretation, nor to that of the churches in any particular area. A plurality of headquarters was one major cause of the early church's departure from the faith before the Falling Away of A.D. 325.

The General Assembly of the church of God is a powerful tribunal, not so much because of any individual, nor of all the members who gather for the occasion, but because it is ordained of God for the purpose it serves. My father, A.J. Tomlinson, spoke of it as "an august body." Read a quotation from his message in the *White Wing Messenger* dated June 7, 1941

"Every member should recognize the authority of that august body, the word august means having grandeur and dignity; majestic; of a nature to inspire awe and reverence; high rank; eminent; noble. Thus it is a mighty Assembly. On account of this, every member should respect and honor and obey the decrees made by the Assembly. When the decrees of the early Church Assembly were read, they rejoiced for the consolation. They were happy because it was made plain to them what they should do. They did not say anything against them, or attempt to be disloyal in any way."

I have gone into some detail in order to encourage the present membership of the church to attend the Assembly if they can, and to respect, honor, and obey its decisions whether or not they are ever able to attend. There has never been anything gained in my local church, or by any individual, by setting itself (or himself) against the Assembly's rulings. I have never known anyone to prosper long who did this. I believe the reason for this will become clear by a careful reading of Hebrews 12:22-24:

"But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel. See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven."

Come to the Assembly if you can, and enjoy your God-given privilege of participating; but if you cannot attend, participate at home by prayer and supplication on the behalf of those who will be responsible for the business.



God-Ordained Church Government

Continued from page 7

out as the chief apostle and elder among these three. Besides the fact that he moderated the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, the following passages show his eminent stature and position in the church (Acts 12.17; 15.13-21; 21.18; Gal 1.19; 2.9, 12).

Jesus seems to take it for granted that everyone knows there must be a “*chief among you*” (Mt. 20.27; Mk. 10.44-45). Remarkably, this idea is a common view and practice even among primitive peoples, including the American Indians. For obviously someone in the order of government must be able to say finally, “*Wherefore my sentence is*” (Acts 15.19). Thus, a team needs a captain; a city a mayor; a state a governor; an army a commander or general; a company an executive officer, etc. In the narrative of the centurion in Mt. 8.5-10, Jesus honors the centurion’s sense of humility (“*I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof*”), but also his understanding of duly-appointed authority both regarding Jesus’ heavenly authority and his own as being appointed by Rome.

We have in Zion Assembly given the title of “Presiding Bishop” to the special or strategic position of universal oversight in the church. We believe it is in line with the way God mediated instrumentally His sovereign headship over the church under both Old and New Covenants, beginning with *Moses*, then *Joshua*, and continuing through the kings (*Saul, David* and *Solomon*, et al.) whose judgments and oversight of God’s people were on occasion conditioned by judges (*Samuel*, e.g.) and prophets (*Elijah* and *Elisha*, et al.). Further, after Jesus ascended back to the Father, He left the oversight of the church in the hands of apostles and elders, preeminent among them were *James*, the Lord’s brother, *Peter, John*, and later *Paul* and others (Acts 20.17-18, 21-32; Cor. 11.28; et al.). Moreover, the prolific writings of the Early Church Fathers in the second and third centuries also give plain evidence that this system of government continued until the predicted apostasy culminated under Sylvester I and Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century, which ushered in the Dark Ages in the succeeding centuries (Is. 60.2; Acts 20.29; 1 Tim. 1-3; 2 Pet. 2-22; 3.1-3; Jude 3; Rev. 2.5; et al.).

Now regarding the function, privileges, and limitations of the office of Presiding Bishop in the church and the person occupying it. The Assembly has laid down a criterion of requirements regarding the character and qualifications of the man holding this sacred position of trust; including that he should have “a proven record faithfulness, stability, and experience, and be manifestly gifted and anointed to govern or rule in the church” (*Assembly Minutes*, 2015, p. 56). It was also emphasized that the General Assembly in which

the Presiding Bishop is selected should “feel assured” by the Holy Spirit that the selection “is pleasing to the Lord” (*Ibid.*, p. 56); and further that the man holding the office should have a servant’s heart and a pastoral disposition, over against a spirit of lordship or dictatorial disposition (*Ibid.*, p. 56).

Further, it has been emphasized that in the past the extent of the authority and privileges of this position, under the title of “General Overseer”, were somewhat abused; then in an effort to correct abuses the pendulum swung to the other extreme and the person holding the office was prevented from freely exercising his calling and God-given gifts to lead and guide the church to fulfill her mission and prophetic destiny. So, we have been warned about swinging the pendulum from one extreme to the other. This brings us to where we are in this present hour: yet seeking to fully understand this important position, so that the church can fully benefit from it and the man occupying the office may freely function and exercise the gifts and abilities which God has imparted to him for this purpose. More will be said about this in a moment.

The position of Presiding Bishop calls for confident and courageous leadership. The man holding the office must “[*take*] the oversight” of the church with conviction and a strong sense of personal calling. He must be intimately acquainted with the Lord, and eager always to please Him and carry forward His prophetic plan for the church. Accordingly, he does not seek to please men but God; and, therefore, rules and guides the church not according to public opinion but according to the revealed will of God---His commandments and principles. He is not intimidated by criticism and threats and thus does not compromise or modify biblical standards to conform the church to the whims of men; but rather fears God and is loyal to His Word and government. His ear is open to the voice of the Lord and he has a fixed disposition to establish God’s will on earth even as it is in heaven! He thus oversees the church theocratically, leading and guiding her to fulfill her prophetic mission in the world.

We see this kind of leadership in men like Moses who withstood the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram and their followers---250 overseers (“*men of renown*”) in the “church in the wilderness” (Numb. 16.1-33). Moses was bold and confident because he was carrying forward the plan of God for the government of His people: and God honored his leadership. The defense that he gave for his leadership and actions was simply, “*I have not done [these things] of mine own mind*” (v. 28), that is, he was reverently standing and acting for the Lord and carrying forward His will into action. The result of this uprising against the government of God was calamitous and tragic for

Korah and his followers: the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up including their wives and children! (vv. 25-35; Jude vv.10-11).

The apostle Paul demonstrated also this kind of courageous leadership. While he was preaching and laboring to establish the church in Asia (in Ephesus and the region roundabout), he was contradicted and withstood powerfully by Alexander, Philetus, Hymanaeus and others, and forsaken by Demas, a fellow worker, and thrown into prison being blasphemed and falsely accused. Indeed, he was at first forsaken by all men; but he pressed on and persevered. His courage and fortitude won out in the end. He confessed that though *“At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me . . . Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. And the Lord shall deliver me out of every evil work . . .”* (2 Tim. 4.14-18; see also 1 Tim. 1.20; 2 Tim. 1.15; Acts 19. 22-41).

In addition to the important characteristics and qualifications for the office of Presiding Bishop mentioned above, I would add one more that perhaps outranks all the others in importance. I speak now as one who has held this position for fifteen years, and beforehand worked closely under general appointment with Bishop M.A. Tomlinson for eight years (1982-1990), and afterwards for ten more years with his successor, Billy D. Murray, Sr. (1990-2000). I believe I can say in some sense regarding Zion Assembly what Paul said to some of the New Testament churches, *“I have begotten you through the Gospel”*, meaning that I have been instrumental in leading many of you here today to the Lord, ordaining and mentoring many of you in the ministry, and have also led the way in restoring and reorganizing the church on the original foundation laid by Christ and the Apostles. Moreover, we accomplished these things amidst malicious slander, hateful persecution, and powerful opposition. And for the record I also labored with my faithful wife and others in the early months of this noble effort without any financial support, and then for many more months with only meager support. I call attention to these experiences here only because they helped to qualify me to say what I’m saying; namely, that the man who serves as Presiding Bishop should be a “father” of the church: one who has “begotten” through the Spirit and Word of God many of the souls to whom he is serving and ministering. It was thus that Paul wrote to the Corinthians in defense of his leadership and position in the church, saying, *“Ye are our epistle [or letter of commendation] written in our hearts, known and read of all men . . . manifestly declared to be the epistle of*

Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God” (2 Cor. 3.2-3).

Further, the man holding the office of Presiding Bishop should have a proven record that he is *“[a pastor] after God’s own heart”* (Jer. 3.15; 23.4), not merely a pulpiteer or gifted instructor of the Word: for as the apostle says, *“For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ; yet have ye not many fathers”* (1 Cor. 4.15). The God-ordained and anointed bishop in this position protects and feeds the sheep of his pasture and tends to and cares for all their spiritual interests and needs. He is in spiritual union with his flock; has *“begotten”* the believers out of his own “bowels” or inner affections (Phile. 10, 12); and refreshes the *“bowels of the saints”* through his love and care (v. 7). In a word, the Presiding Bishop and all pastors should have the very mind and inner affections of Christ working in them to care for and to spiritually build up the saints, each pastor and overseer according to his appointed sphere of authority and responsibility (Rom. 12.3-8; 1 Cor. 12.4-30; 2 Cor. 10.13-16; Eph. 4.7-13; Phil. 2.1-8).

Now in the overall governing structure of the church, the Presiding Bishop is subject to the General Assembly, which is the church’s “highest tribunal of authority on earth under Christ”; and in 51 weeks between Assemblies, he functions in counsel with an International Executive Council, the presbyters (the national and state overseers), and the ministers in general. It should be borne in mind always, however, that the church is not an oligarchy, episcopacy, or popish system, neither a presbyterian nor congregational form of government. The church is not run by committees and councils nor by a handful of influential men and women. Rather it is a peculiar system that is especially conducive for the sovereign headship of Christ, who, as has been pointed out, retains always the prerogative and divine right to break in and act directly in the church through extraordinary gifts, operations, administrations of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12.4-11, 28-30; Eph. 4.3-13). For in the Bible church, God is king and Jesus is Lord! and the Word of God is the final word on all matters of faith, government, and discipline.

This aspect of theocratic government is vitally important; for good and well-meaning men are prone to make serious errors. We have examples of this in church history under both Old and New Covenants. Abraham, for example, conspired with his wife, Sarah, to have a child by her servant, Hagar, contradicting God’s plan for Sarah to conceive miraculously and give birth to Isaac, the *“son of promise”* (Gen. 16.1-16; 21.10, 12; Gal. 4.22-30). Moses smote the rock twice in the wilderness in anger and arrogance not discerning the serious implications of reproaching

the very work of God in Christ for the salvation of the world (Ex. 17.6; Numb. 20.8-12; Ps. 106.32-33; 1 Cor. 10.4). David would have, had it been his power, prevented God from striking down Uzzah for touching the sacred Ark, and in so doing would have diminished the theocratic message and discipline of the church (2 Sam. 6.6-9). In the New Testament, Peter would have prevented Christ from being crucified if it had been in his power (Mt. 16.21-23). He also failed to comprehend the full meaning of Christ's stature and uniqueness in the Transfiguration, ignorantly suggesting that three tabernacles be built to honor Moses and Elijah with Christ (Mt. 17.2-6). And he would have ignorantly prevented Jesus [if had been in his power] from establishing the doctrine and practice of footwashing in the church (Jn. 13.1-17). Further, even after Peter was Spirit-baptized, he caused a dissimulation in the church between Jews and Gentiles (Gal. 2.11-14). It is no wonder then that we hold James, the Lord's brother, as the ruling bishop of the church rather than Peter; nor should we be surprised that James, not Peter, moderated the first General Assembly held at Jerusalem in Acts 15.

There are a hundred other instances that might be cited here to prove the point that the church must always exalt and honor the headship of Christ above all, allowing Him always the freedom to ultimately break in to save the church from committing grave and destructive errors. Still, however, in the normal course of operations in a theocracy, God works through ruling bishops and elders whose offices are listed as the highest gifts in the church (Mt. 24.45; Mk. 13.34; Acts 14.23; 15.2, 4, 6, 22-28; 1 Cor. 12.28; Eph. 4.13; Titus 1.5; et al); and at the apex of the Lord's duly-appointed ruling system is the position of Presiding Bishop (Mt. 20.27; Acts 15.19). This office is therefore critically important in the overall context of the church's governing system; and thus, the one holding the office, as well as other ruling elders, should be *"very highly esteemed in love for their work's sake."* To diminish or in any way injure the esteem for the one holding the office of Presiding Bishop inevitably injures the whole church. To do so, according to the ancient adage, is like "cutting off your nose to spite your

"This office is therefore critically important in the overall context of the church's governing system; and thus, the one holding the office, as well as other ruling elders, should be "very highly esteemed in love for their work's sake." To diminish or in any way injure the esteem for the one holding the office of Presiding Bishop inevitably injures the whole church. To do so, according to the ancient adage, is like 'cutting off your nose to spite your face' . . . The Presiding Bishop can only function effectively therefore on the ground of a high degree of trust and confidence: for as the ancient maxim says, "There is no government where there is no trust."

face." Further, the esteem encouraged by the apostle for this duly-appointed leader is not merely in respect to his position, but for the man himself; on the basis that he has a proven record of integrity and sacrificial love and care for the sheep; and the fact that God has apparently called and ordained him for the work that he is doing. The Presiding Bishop can only function effectively therefore on the ground of a high degree of trust and confidence: for as the ancient maxim says, "There is no government where there is no trust." Theocracy worked in the "church in the wilderness"

under the oversight of Moses because the people believed not only the Lord but also *"His servant Moses"* (Ex. 14.31).

We might well expect, moreover, that as the Lord himself acted strangely and mysteriously on occasion, so might the executive leader of the church under the inspiration and unction of the Lord. For how would King Solomon have thought to pretend to cut in half a baby in order to reveal the rightful mother except God had imparted to him the wisdom to do so? (1 Kg. 3.23-28); and this was the conclusion of *"all Israel . . . for they saw*

that the wisdom of God was in him to do judgment." Or who would have thought to command a prophet to marry a known prostitute to illustrate the love of God for His unfaithful and backslidden people except God inspired him to do so (Hos. 1.2; 3.1-3). Many judgments are therefore entrusted to the chief leader of the church: for in the divinely prescribed order of things he speaks and acts in many instances for Christ, the head of the church.

We see then that whether God intervenes directly or indirectly in the government of the church, His sovereignty and conclusive will must always be emphasized and preserved, that is, if our claim in Zion Assembly to be God's church is to carry any weight and spiritual conviction. For Christ is the *"author"* as well as the *"finisher"* of our faith; and He is the *"Chief Shepherd"* and *"Bishop of our souls"* (1 Pet. 2.25; 5.4). It is thus that Ezekiel prophesied that in the very last days, the Lord will *"set up one shepherd over [His church and kingdom], and he shall feed them, even My servant David [i.e., Christ] a prince among them; I the Lord hath spoken it. And I will make them a covenant of peace . . . and there shall be showers of*

blessing” (Ezek. 34.23-25); which is to say, that the Presiding Bishop and the overseers and pastors in the church will be so much in union with the mind and will of Christ that it will be as if there is simply one anointed ruler (cf. Is. 52.8-10; Rom. 15.5-6; 1 Cor. 1.10; Eph. 4.3-16; Phil. 3.16).

It is this vision of the glory of the last days church, it seems to me, that directed Paul’s overarching argument in Roman 9.9-33. God’s infinite wisdom, sovereignty and divine aim must rule ultimately in His church. Accordingly, the key verses in this Pauline passage are vv. 18-26:

“Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault! For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonor? What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction. And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles? As he saith also in Osee, I will call them my people which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved. And it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people; there shall they be called the children of the living God.”

What is clear in these passages is that God must be free to work His sovereign will among us. For *“it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy”* (v. 16). For who but God has the wisdom, power, and perfect judgment to harden one and soften another, or to show mercy to one and deny it to others? Who but the Lord *“has power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor, and another unto dishonor?”* (v. 21). For in Him alone dwells infinite knowledge and grace without respect to persons. And He has chosen to reveal to His church intimately and insightfully His divine mind and righteous judgments (Mt. 16.17-19; 1 Cor. 2.9-16; 5.13; 6.1-4; see also Is. 2.2-4): and no one can change or alter His plan in this regard! (Eph. 3.9-10; 1 Tim. 3.15). In the end, the Lord’s true Zion---made up of regenerated (born-again) Jews and Gentiles joined together in one covenant body, Eph.

2.14-16; 3.6---will emerge triumphant through faith; and as she goes forward she will be waving the banner of His free grace and glorious power!

Thus, in a theocracy the Spirit and the Word of God prevail. We must always *“hear ye Him”* (Mt. 17.5) and yield to the Lord’s will through the ministry and operations of the Holy Ghost; being careful always to acknowledge and yield to His infinite mind and sovereign will, lest we find ourselves *“whittling on the wrong end of the stick”* that is, usurping prerogatives that belong exclusively to God. Therefore, brethren, take heed to encourage and give liberty to the operations, demonstrations, and gifts of the Holy Ghost so that we might be led by Him *“into all truth and righteousness”* and be made to *“sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”*

In consideration of the normal course of governmental operations in the church, we are therefore admonished to respect, obey, and submit to those duly-appointed over us in the Lord (Heb. 13.7, 17). This is true at the local level of administration regarding the authority and function of pastors, and with overseers at state and national levels of administration, and especially regarding the Presiding Bishop who counsels and coordinates with leaders at every level of administration in the church throughout the world. For God’s anointing rests upon him as the chief leader of the church, and often imparts a *“word of knowledge”* or *“word of wisdom”* or *“discerning of spirits”* to enable him to know the Mind of Christ; so that he in turn can teach and guide the church according to the mysteries of God’s will. We see this throughout the history of the church in both Old and New Testaments. It’s true there is *“safety in the multitude of counselors”* yet the chief leader must finally weigh the counsel of all and then give his sentence (Acts 15.13-19).

Only by yielding to God’s system of government can we be a *“peculiar treasure unto [God] above all people”* (Ex. 19.5; Deut. 4.20, 23; 5.1-4; 7.6-9; 14.2, 21; 26.18; 32.8-9; 1 Kgs. 8.51-53; Ps 135.4-6; Song 6.8-10; 8.5-12; Is. 41.8; 49.1-6; Ezek. 16.8; Rev. 12.1-17; 19.7-8; 21.2-3, 9-10); and only by putting into practice God’s ordained government will we realize the kind of stability and increase that the church did in the New Testament (Acts 16.4-5). Otherwise we will surely sink into confusion and disorder: for *theocracy* distinguishes God’s church from maverick or renegade independent ministries on one hand, and from common man-handled denominations on the other. Practicing theocracy is what defines Zion Assembly as being truly a divine institution. Let us then walk softly before the Lord’s presence (at the base of Mt. Sinai, so to speak): for therein is a *“dreadful place”* and *“our God is a consuming fire.”*



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Dickson, TN

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