



Christocracy as a Theological Foundation: An Analysis of Leadership Authority in the Presbyterian-Synodal System

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Abstract. *The Presbyterian-Synodal system of church government is based on the ideal theological foundation of Christocracy, the confession that Christ is the sole Head of the Church who rules directly through His Word and Spirit. Theoretically, this model rejects hierarchy, affirms the parity of all ecclesiastical officers (ministers, elders, deacons) as servants, and views the local church council as a complete church (ecclesia completa). However, in historical and contemporary practice, a fundamental tension exists whereby this system consistently deviates into hierarchical and clerical practices. This deviation manifests as a hierarchy of office (clericalism) and a hierarchy of assemblies (Synod-centrism), where authority shifts from Christ to official figures and Synodal structures that are viewed as the "highest court." This article aims to analyze the fundamental causes of this authority shift. Using a qualitative library research method, the author conducts a systematic-theological, historical-critical, and comparative analysis of the works of Reformers (especially Calvin), historical church order documents, and contemporary case studies (such as in Malawi and GMIM).*

This study concludes that this authority shift stems from two primary factors: First, a "theological deficiency" in many church order documents, which fail to affirm Christ's rule "through His Word and Spirit," stating instead only His rule "through the ministry of officials," thus effectively equating official authority with Christ's authority. Second, the historical legacy of Scottish "national covenant" ecclesiology, which was historically intentionally designed with a centralized authority structure for "godly officials" to "rule over" a mixed populace. The author recommends that churches in this tradition revise their church orders to explicitly re-assert the supremacy of Christ's rule through His Word and Spirit over any human official or synodical authority.

Keywords Christocracy, Church Polity, Presbyterian-Synodal, Hierarchy, Clericalism, Authority, National Covenant.

INTRODUCTION

Church government, or church polity, is not merely an administrative matter, but a fundamental theological discipline (ecclesiology) that reflects the church's understanding of God's authority. Among the various systems that developed post-Reformation, the Presbyterian-Synodal system possesses a unique and distinctive theological foundation, deeply rooted in the thought of John Calvin. The primary foundation of this system is Christocracy, the theological affirmation that Jesus Christ is the sole Head (Caput Ecclesiae) and sovereign King over His church. In pure Reformed theology, this reign of Christ is not delegated absolutely to humans or structures, but is exercised directly through the authority of His Word and the work of His Holy Spirit. Consequently, church officials (pastors, elders, deacons) are not seen as hierarchical rulers, but as "instruments" or "servants" (diakonos) whose positions are "equally low," with the collective duty to serve and apply that Word. The entire structure of assemblies, from the local congregation level

(Consistory) to the broader levels (Classis and Synod), is ideally designed as a non-hierarchical "representative democracy," where the broader assembly is not higher than the congregational assembly, but rather functions as a system of checks and balances to prevent tyranny and maintain unity of faith.

However, in historical observation and contemporary practice, a significant and persistent gap exists between this theological idealism of Christocracy and the functional reality of church polity. The Presbyterian-Synodal system shows a strong tendency to "deviate" toward the very practices it seeks to reject, namely hierarchical and clerical ones. This phenomenon of deviation manifests in two main forms. First, a hierarchy of office (clericalism), where a strong perception emerges among the congregation that some offices are "higher" or more powerful; for example, the pastor is considered above the elder, or the elder is considered "senior" and more entitled to "rule" than the deacon (syamas). Second, a hierarchy of assemblies (Synod-centrism), where the broader assembly (Synod) is no longer seen as an equal partner but functions as the "highest court" with full jurisdiction and authority over local churches, a practice more akin to the Episcopal (top-down) model than the Presbyterian (bottom-up/collegial) one. In this practice, authority appears to shift from Christ (through His Word) and becomes centralized in the figure of the official or the assembly structure itself.

This constant gap between the *das Sollen* (what should be, theologically) and the *das Sein* (what happens in practice) gives rise to a fundamental research question: Why does this system, theologically designed to be anti-hierarchical, consistently produce hierarchical practices? The author argues that this deviation is not merely a practical or sociological failure, but is rooted in a "theological deficiency" within the documents and ecclesiology it inherited. Often, church order documents (Church Orders) fail to affirm that Christ rules through "His Word and Spirit," and instead merely state that He rules "through the mediation of office-bearers." This flawed formulation, as identified in the case of the Nkhoma Synod in Malawi, effectively equates the authority of the official with the authority of Christ, thus paving the way for clericalism. Furthermore, the ecclesiological legacy of Scottish Presbyterianism, which focused on the "national covenant" (where the church was equated with the entire "mixed multitude" of the nation), historically and intentionally designed a centralized structure where "godly officials" (a minority) were given authority to "rule over" the congregation (the majority). Therefore, this article aims to analyze how the shift in authority from Christ (Christocracy) to officials (Clericalism) and structures (Synod-centrism) occurs within the Presbyterian-Synodal system, by examining its ideal theological foundations and comparing them with the roots of its

historical and practical deviations.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research utilizes a qualitative approach with a library research design. This method was chosen because the research focus is on analyzing and interpreting theological concepts, historical documents, and ecclesiological practices related to authority within the Presbyterian-Synodal system. Data collection was not conducted through field research, but through an in-depth review of various relevant literature. Primary data in this study include the fundamental works of Reformation theologians, especially John Calvin, as well as historical (such as the Scottish *Second Book of Discipline*) and contemporary church order documents. Secondary sources include academic journal articles, doctoral dissertations, and theological books that specifically discuss Christology, covenant ecclesiology, and the practice of Presbyterian church polity in various contexts.

The data analysis process in this research is descriptive, interpretive, and comparative. First, the author conducts a systematic-theological analysis to extract and define the ideal principles of Christocracy, particularly the concept of Christ as the Head of the Church who rules through His Word and Spirit, and its implications for the equality of offices (anti-clericalism) and the equality of assemblies (anti-hierarchy). Second, the author applies a historical-critical analysis to trace the roots of deviation from this ideal model, focusing on the evolution of national covenant ecclesiology in Scotland and the political factors influencing the Early Church. Third, the author uses a comparative analysis to contrast the ideal theological model (*das Sollen*) with the findings from contemporary case studies (*das Sein*) in various Presbyterian churches, such as in Malawi (Nkhoma and Blantyre Synods) and Indonesia (GMIM). Through a synthesis of these analyses, this research aims to construct a critical argument regarding the fundamental causes of the authority shift that occurs in the practice of the Presbyterian-Synodal system.

DISCUSSION

Christocracy: The Ideal Theological Foundation of Church Governance An analysis of the theological foundation of Presbyterian-Synodal church governance must begin with its understanding of authority. Unlike the Episcopal (authority centralized in the bishop) or Congregational (authority decentralized to the local congregation) systems, the Presbyterian system is based on the fundamental principle of Christocracy: the theological affirmation that Jesus Christ is the sole King, Lord, and Head of the Church (*Caput Ecclesiae*). This foundation, as expounded by John Calvin, is theocratic and theonomic;

God is the sovereign ruler over both church and state, and His law is the supreme source of authority. In Calvin's view, there is no separation between "religion" and "state," as both are spiritual entities subject to God's sovereignty (Gatgounis II, 2011). Reformed Christology, as elaborated by Carolina, et al. (2025), asserts that Christ's reign as King (one of His *munus triplex* or three offices) cannot be separated from His function as Prophet (who rules through His Word) and Priest (who unites His people).

Christocracy, thus, is the direct rule of Christ over His church through the authority of the Bible. This principle of Christocracy has two radical structural implications. First, it rejects all forms of office hierarchy. Because Christ is the only Head, all church officials (pastors, elders, deacons) are merely servants (*diakonos*), stewards, or "instruments" who execute the authority of the Word. Theologically, their positions are equal; none is "higher or lower." Piri, Poluan, & Zetlight (2022), citing Abineno and Karl Barth, affirm that these officials are "equally high, or perhaps more accurately, equally low" before Christ. Second, it rejects a hierarchy of assemblies. Pure Reformed theology views the local church as an *ecclesia completa* (a complete church). Sunarto (2021) asserts that in this ideal model, broader assemblies (Classis or Synod) "should not be considered as a leadership body... that is independent of or higher than the Congregational Assembly." These broader assemblies function as an expression of spiritual bonds and, as emphasized by Gatgounis II (2011), as a mechanism of checks and balances, a principle highly valued by Calvin to prevent "unchecked power" or tyranny. The ideal Presbyterian model, therefore, is a collegial and non-hierarchical "representative democracy."

Historical Deviation: From Presbuteros to Episkopos

This theological foundation of the Reformation was a conscious effort to "restore" what it understood to be the model of the Early Church, which had undergone a historical "deviation." Zgambo (2021) analyzes that the ideal New Testament model of governance was based on a plurality of elders (*presbuteros*), where the terms *presbuteros* (elder) and *episkopos* (overseer) were used synonymously to refer to a collective, equal leadership. However, as time went on, the Early Church gradually deviated from this principle of plurality toward a model of the monarchical bishop. Zgambo (2021) identifies three main driving factors: (1) The need for doctrinal unity to combat persecution and heresy; (2) Political factors, where the church began to imitate the hierarchical structure of the Roman Empire; and (3) The "efficiency" factor, where leadership by one authoritative person was considered more efficient than shared leadership. This shift from *presbuteros* to *episkopos* was the first historical moment of deviation, where authority that was once collective

became centralized in a single human figure.

Deviation in Contemporary Practice: Clericalism and Hierarchy of Office

Ironically, churches that inherited the Reformation theology which explicitly rejected episcopal deviation often fall back into the same pattern. There is a significant "gap" between the ideal Presbyterian theology (*das Sollen*) and the practice on the ground (*das Sein*). Case studies in various contexts show the practice of deep-rooted clericalism or hierarchy of office. In the GMIM context, Piri et al. (2022) identified a perception among congregants that the office of Elder is "higher" in position than that of Deacon (*Syamas*). As a result, a Deacon's decisions tend not to be respected, while an Elder may be tempted to "rule the congregation" because they feel "senior," an attitude contrary to the principle of *diakonia* (service). This phenomenon aligns with Tamaweol's (2020) critique of the practice where pastors, due to their theological education status or their position as full-time workers, can act as "dictators" who marginalize the role of "lay" elders and deacons. Tamaweol also criticizes the reverse, where elders view themselves as the congregation's "DPR" (House of Representatives) tasked with supervising the pastor as a "hired worker." Zgambo (2018) even traces the root of this attitude to the missionary legacy in Malawi, where there was a clear distinction of racial status, with explicit statements that "our native pastors are not equal to European pastors." All these practices show a clear deviation from Reformed theology, which affirms the "equally low" status of all church officials before Christ as the only Head.

Structural Deviation: Synod-Centrism and Hierarchy of Assemblies

The second deviation, which is more structural, is the shift of authority from the local church to the broader assemblies, creating a hierarchy of assemblies or Synod-centrism. The ideal model described by Sunarto (2021) asserts that the Synod "should not be considered... higher than the Congregational Assembly" and has no right to interfere in the affairs of the local congregation unless invited. However, practice on the ground shows the opposite. Zgambo (2018), in his analysis of the Blantyre Synod Constitution in Malawi, found that the church order document explicitly defines the existence of "three hierarchies of courts." In this structure, the Congregational Assembly (Kirk Session) is officially referred to as the "lowest court," while the Synod is the "highest court" possessing "both original and appellate jurisdiction." This "top-down" model transforms the Synod from a coordinating partner into a center of power. Authority is centralized in the Synod, which in turn controls resources, finances, and the placement of staff (pastors), while the local

congregational assembly is weakened. This shift fundamentally changes the Presbyterian system from a "representative democracy" (the Calvin/Sunarto model) to a Synod-centric "collegialism" more akin to the Episcopal system, where Zgambo (2021) notes that "efficiency" is often still used as a modern justification for the centralization of power.

Roots of Deviation: Theological Deficiency and Historical Legacy

An analysis of the gap between the idealism of Christocracy and the practice of hierarchy shows that the problem is not merely sociological failure, but is rooted in theological and historical foundations. First, Zeze's (2012) dissertation identifies a fatal "theological deficiency" in many Presbyterian church order documents. His case study on the *Zolamulira* (Nkhoma Synod) document found that it only states that Christ rules "through office-bearers," but omits the crucial phrase: "through His Word and Holy Spirit." This failure to center authority on the Word and Spirit effectively equates the authority of the official with the authority of Christ. This opens the door wide for clericalism, where the "word of the official" (or the decision of the Synod) is equated with the "word of Christ." Ironically, the ideal definition presented by Sunarto (2021) also contains the same oversight ("that rule He exercises through the mediation of church officials"), indicating how deeply this theological problem has permeated.

Second, the historical legacy of Scottish Presbyterianism, as analyzed by Spurlock (2020), suggests that the system may have been intentionally designed to be centralized. Unlike Congregationalism (which limits the church only to the "saints"), Scottish ecclesiology was based on the "National Covenant," which viewed the entire nation, including the "mixed multitude" of the elect and non-elect, as the "Visible Church." To manage this not-entirely-godly "mass," authority (the "keys of the kingdom") was deliberately taken from the local congregation (*First Book of Discipline*, 1560) and given exclusively to "godly officials" (*Second Book of Discipline*, 1578), who were given authority to "rule over" the congregation. Power was then centralized in the Presbytery (Classis) and Synod to ensure doctrinal purity and discipline. Thus, the hierarchical and Synod-centric practices seen today can be understood as a legacy of this Scottish "collegialism" model, which from the beginning was more focused on "rule by officials" than on a pure Christocracy centered on the Word and Spirit.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of the theological foundations, historical legacy, and contemporary practice of Presbyterian-Synodal church governance concludes that there is a fundamental

tension, even contradiction, between its professed ideal theology and its functioning structural reality. Theoretically, the system is based on the pure principle of Christocracy, as expounded by John Calvin and affirmed by Reformed theologians. This foundation asserts that Christ is the sole Head of the Church who rules directly through the authority of His Word and His Holy Spirit. In this ideal model, all church officials (pastors, elders, deacons) have an equal standing, functioning as "servants" or "instruments" who are "equally low," and the broader assemblies (Synod) are theoretically no higher than the local congregational assembly. However, this research finds that in historical and contemporary practice, this ideal model consistently deviates into a hierarchical and clerical system. This deviation manifests in two forms: (1) Hierarchy of Office, where, as seen in the GMIM and Malawi contexts, a perception arises that pastors are higher than elders, and elders are more authoritative than deacons. (2) Hierarchy of Assemblies (Synod-Centrism), where church constitutions explicitly define the Synod as the "highest court," a "top-down" model that shifts authority from the local church to the Synod structure (Zgambo, 2018). The author concludes that the cause of this shift in authority from Christ to officials and structures is twofold. First, there is a "theological deficiency" in many church order documents, as identified by Zeze (2012) in the case of the Nkhoma Synod. These documents often fail to affirm that Christ rules "through His Word and Spirit," and instead only state that He rules "through the mediation of officials." This flawed formulation effectively opens the door for equating the authority of officials with the authority of Christ. Second, the ecclesiological legacy of Scottish Presbyterianism, as analyzed by Spurlock (2020), was historically and intentionally designed to be centralized. Based on the "national covenant" (church = nation), authority (the "keys of the kingdom") was exclusively given to "godly officials" to "rule over" the mixed-multitude congregation. Therefore, this research recommends that churches in the Presbyterian-Synodal tradition conduct a critical re-evaluation of their church orders and practices. To restore true Christocracy, reform is not sufficiently achieved by merely rejecting hierarchy verbally. The church must consciously and explicitly revise its church order documents to re-assert the absolute supremacy of Christ's reign through His Word and Spirit, above the authority of officials or assemblies. Without this restoration of theological foundation, the Presbyterian-Synodal system will remain vulnerable to the hierarchical deviations that are, in fact, contrary to the Reformed theology it professes.

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