

You will see that as we mentioned in figure 2 of this section, the confession does not resolve the issues of polity, ideological difference, or concepts of church and state. It does rule against episcopacy in the broadest terms and an unordered independence. But between these extremes there is a lot of room for thought and action.

C. Ecclesiology in the Period of the Early Church

1. General summary

Ecclesiology, perhaps more than any other formal doctrine, found its expression one borne out of the growing experience. (Remember: the basic doctrine is biblical...the expressions are the fashioning of thinkers and scholars.) The circumstances of the world tended to mold it more than many of the other doctrines with which the earlier fathers had to deal. This was abetted by the fact that any doctrine of the church, in expression, had to account for the "visible as well as the invisible picture. That means the teaching had to encompass both the physical organization and the spiritual entity. It was no easy task. Accordingly the developments in ecclesiology reflect less theological base, in general, and more empirical character and observation. The molding factors tended to overweigh the exact biblical teaching--is the point of the observation--and one of the reasons why church governmental ideas vary so much from group to group.

It is true that the early church had the advantage of a "oneness" factor not known since so in their ecclesiology they did not have to provide for, or contend with, what we will later call denominationalism. It seems that any group that adopted a particular distinctive title (as in 1 Corinthians 1) was soon thought of in a sectarian capacity and virtually disregarded in the thinking of the church. Thus the concept of oneness without a sharp structural unity was very meaningful and the church could think of itself as a body and not as many bodies. While we may try to avoid the latter in practical realms, one will discover that it is the way we think about it...in practical realms. So we can say with some certainty that while the fathers, et al, gripped the essential spiritual character of the church and saw the great privileges and grounds of believers, they were moved very heavily by their society and their interests in the forming of the more precise ideas of polity and, eventually, practice.

2. The Early Picture

a. On the character of the church we note these generalizations:

(1) It is viewed as a community for the worship of God and the constructive improvement of the worshippers.