

CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Key question

How is the local church to be governed?

Key text

I Peter 5:1-3

“Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow-elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God among you, not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock..”

Introduction

1. Where does human authority reside within the church and who is to exercise it?
2. In looking to the Scripture for revelation concerning the subject of church government we must make a distinction between material that is descriptive (the practice of the early church) and prescriptive (the principles taught by the Apostles).
3. What authority should be given to the early (post apostolic) church in making decisions about present church government and Biblical interpretation?

A. Major forms of church government.

1. **Episcopal** - strong hierarchy of ordained clergy above the local congregation.
2. **Presbyterian** - a series of church courts with emphasis upon the local presbytery.
3. **Congregational** - emphasis upon the local congregation and democracy.
4. **Nongovernment** - emphasis upon the autonomy of the individual as led by the Spirit.

	Episcopal	Presbyterian	Congregational	Nongovernment
Authority	bishop	elder, church courts	congregation	Individual
Examples	Methodist, Anglican, Some Lutherans, Roman Catholic,	Presbyterian, Reformed, Some Bible church's	Baptist, Congregationalists, Most Lutherans, Some Independent church's	Quakers, Plymouth Brethren,
Distinctive	Different degrees of ordination or clergy. High church	Only one level of clergy Church courts (Session - Presbytery - Synod - General Assembly)	Autonomy & democracy. Pastor = only elder	Individual leading of the Spirit, Invisible church only, Low church
Advantages	Unity of structure, style, & doctrine.	Coordinating of clergy and laity.	Flexibility	Reliance on the Spirit

		Scripture has final authority.		
Disadvantages	Too much authority given to an office (not a person).	Too much authority given to presbytery.	Competitiveness, Lack of Unity,	Unruly,
Support	Acts 6:3,6; 14:23; James' role in the early church; Church history	Acts 1:23-26; 20:17; I Tim. 3:1-2; Synagogue model	In NT the emphasis is on the local church. Priesthood of all believers, NT letters addressed to congregations not clergy.	Charismatic nature of the local church in I Cor. Priesthood of all believers,
Challenges	Descriptive vs. Prescriptive texts. No clear patterns in Scripture or history. Paul's example	Little clear Biblical support. Individual members are voiceless	Disregard for Apostolic authority, Plurality of elders, Rev.2-3	Ignores NT examples of human authority and church structure.

B. Differences between high and low church styles and worship.

1. One of the issues that distinguishes various forms of church government and worship is the way the OT and NT are seen in relationship to the church. (see notes from lesson #1)
2. The following chart lays out some of the distinctives.

“Low Church”	“High Church”
New Covenant	Old Covenant
(Congregational Gov.)	(Episcopal Gov.)
Elders in Congregation	Priests over Parish
Local Autonomy	Hierarchy
Assembly	Temple
Pulpit	Altar
Ordinances	Sacraments
Experiences	Symbols

C. The relationship of the church to Peter.

View One	View Two	View Three
“The Rock” = Peter	“The Rock” = Christ	“The Rock” = the confession of Peter
Held by Tertullian, Cyprian, Vatican I & II	Held by Augustine, Calvin, Zwingli	Held by Chrysostom, Zahn
Arguments for: Christ was speaking to Peter when he spoke of the rock. <i>Petros</i> (Peter) means a small rock. According to Roman Catholicism, Peter was the first pope.	Arguments for: Passages such as 1 Corinthians 3:11; 1 Peter 2:4-8 <i>Petra</i> is used metaphorically of Christ in the New Testament. Christ makes a distinction between <i>petros</i> and <i>petra</i> .	Arguments for: Christ was pleased with Peter’s confession (Matt. 16:16-18). Peter’s confession is that on which the preaching office was established.
Arguments against: A distinction is made between <i>petros</i> (a small rock) and <i>petra</i> (a big rock).	Arguments against: Christ may not have spoken these exact words, since he spoke Aramaic.	Arguments against: Peter denied Christ’s impending death (Matt.

<p>Peter calls Christ the foundation (1 Peter 1:4-8).</p> <p>Peter never claimed to be the pope</p> <p>1 Corinthians 3:11 makes it impossible for Peter to be the foundation of the church.</p>	<p>Christ never claims to be the rock.</p>	<p>16:22-23).</p> <p>The office of preaching was established long before Peter's confession.</p>
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D. Leadership in the local Church - What does the Bible teach?

1. Pre-Christian traditions

- a. The Greeks, Romans and Jews each had official authoritative boards composed of several men elected or appointed from the people.
 1. The Greek “gerousia” or town board.
 2. The Roman “senate”.
 3. The Jewish synagogue “presbytery”.
- b. It appears that in each of the above examples the large board elected from its midst:
 1. “Bishops”—official supervisors (those with authority).
 2. “Deacons”—servants (those who carry out orders).
- c. It is quite possible that the early church followed a somewhat similar pattern.

2. The structure of New Testament church government.

- a. The N.T. does not clearly lay out a detailed model of church government but rather suggests:
 1. An evolving format starting with the 12 apostles (in the early chapters of Acts) moving to a delegation of responsibility (in Acts 6) and later to a more complex system of official boards (Acts 15, 20).
 2. A formation of local church government based upon spiritual principles that may be expressed in different ways depending upon the size of the church, the culture, and the gifted men present.
 - a. The functional headship of Christ.
 - b. The priesthood of all believers.
 - c. The diversity of gifts & ministries within the church.
 - d. The appointment by the Spirit of pastors over the flock.
 3. That certain leaders possessed trans-local authority (apostles) while others (elders) had local authority only.
- b. Although local churches in the N.T. seem to have been autonomous (governed from within) there is indication that a spirit of identity with and subjection to other (larger and more mature) congregations existed. See Acts 15,16.
- c. It is generally understood that two offices are to be recognized in a mature local church—ELDER & DEACON.

3. The elder

- a. There are three terms that are related to the office of LEADER.
 1. **Elder** (PRESBUTEROS) describes the man as one with spiritual authority.
 - a. Greek Word: PRESBUTEROS; means literally “an older person”
 - b. In ancient days the aged were rulers. The term developed into a title that was given to any ruler, of any age.

- c. N.T. use: generally of ruling office: elders of Jewish nation (Acts 4:8), elders of Christian church (Acts 14:23).
- d. Church eldership not from Jewish eldership.
2. **Bishop** or Overseer (EPISKOPOS) describes the position that the Elder occupies.
3. **Pastor** or Shepherd (POIMEN) describes the function of the Elder with respect to the people.
4. **Steward** (OIKONOMOS) describes the function of the Elder with respect to the gospel.
- b. The church leaders have a three fold responsibility to the body.
 1. **RULING**—judicial & administrative Acts 20:28, I Tim. 5:17.
 - a. Administrative (to rule the church as a steward of God, Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:2-3).
 - b. Officiative (to lead the church; to preside over the church, James 5:14).
 - c. Representative (to represent the church when necessary, Acts 20:17-31).
 2. **TEACHING**—feeding
 - a. Doctrine—Titus 1:9, 1 Tim. 5:17.
 - b. Life-style—1 Peter 5:3, Heb. 13:7.
 3. **PASTORING**—1 Pet. 5:2-3, Ezek. 34:1-4, Jas. 5:14-15, Acts 20:28.
- c. The church leaders must meet certain qualifications.
 1. **Orthodoxy** - of confession, character, & conduct.
 2. **Wisdom** - from experience in life & understanding of Scripture.
 3. **Respect** - by the congregation & existing leaders.
 4. **Pastor's heart** - willing to sacrifice self for the flock.
 5. Specific qualifications
 - a. **I Timothy 3:1-7**
 1. A blameless life (righteous behavior, Titus 1:6-8; I Tim. 3:2,9).
 2. Even-tempered (not a fighter; patient, I Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:7-8).
 3. A lover of good (not addicted to wine, greedy for money, unfair, selfish, I Tim. 3:3; Titus 1:8).
 4. A good reputation with those outside church godly out = godly in, I Tim. 3:7.
 5. A family man having one wife and faithful children, I Tim. 3:2,4; Titus 1:6.
 - b. **Titus 1:5-9**
 1. Holds to the word (faithful to doctrine, Titus 1:9).
 2. Able to teach (assumes knowledge, I Tim. 3:2).
 3. A sober, sound mind (thinking through problems, I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7).
 4. A mature Christian (only mature can handle authority of leadership, I Tim. 3:6).
 5. Must be a man (women not permitted to rule in the church, I Tim. 2:11-12).
- d. Church leaders are **appointed by God's Spirit and recognized by men**.
 1. There should be a **plurality** of leaders in the local church.
 - a. Plurality of elders was common in each of the early New Testament churches, Acts 14:23; 20:17; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:5.

- b. I Timothy 3:2 is offered as an example of singular eldership: “bishop;” but this is most likely referring to a leader, a president of the elders/deacons.
 - c. No definite number is laid down for the church to elect.
 - d. Plural eldership with apparent equal authority, Jas. 5:14.
2. The **Holy Spirit appoints** leaders in the church, Acts 20:28 and these appointments are recognized by:
- a. The existing church leaders, Acts 14:23.
 - b. The individual’s own sense of calling, I Tim. 3:1.
 - c. The congregation, Acts 6:1-6.
 - d. The authority of the elder is delegated by the church. The elder has no authority in the church other than that given him by the church. It is given by the church and can be taken from him by the church.
3. **Election**
- a. One who seeks this office seeks a “noble task”, 1 Tim. 3:1.
 - b. The church needs to conduct a careful investigation to see if a man’s life lines up with the qualifications, 1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9.
 - c. Length of eldership is unspecified.
4. **Ordination**
- a. Ordination should refer to an act of “appointing,” not to formal ceremony of induction into office.
 - b. Ordination ceremony is as follows: laying on of hands, prayer, fasting, a reading of qualifications, vows.
 - c. The elders of the church should be in charge of the ceremony, as they should be of all official meetings.
 - d. Ordination is the church’s recognition of the spiritual fitness in its chosen officers. Acts 6:3-6
- e. Church leaders occupy a position of **authority** in the local body.
- 1. This authority is derived from and patterned after Jesus, I Pet. 5:1-5, Acts 20:28.
 - a. It is not like the tyranny of the world’s leaders, Matt. 20:25-28.
 - b. It is not self-serving, Ezek. 34:1-4.
 - c. It is like a father in a home, I Tim. 3:4-5, Acts 15:15, 22, 16:4.
 - d. It is characterized by sacrificial responsibility and earned trust, Heb. 13:17, Ezek. 34:1-4, I Pet. 5:3.
 - e. The authority of the elder is spiritual; his authority is not ecclesiastical—that is, it is not foundational to the existence or continuation of the church.
 - 2. This authority is worthy of special respect by the congregation.
 - a. Elders are to receive honor, I Tim. 5:17-20, I Thess. 5:12-13.
 - b. Teaching elders are to receive pay, I Cor. 9:7-12, I Tim. 5:17-18.
 - c. Elders are not to be rebuked without much evidence, I Tim. 5:1, 19.
 - d. The church is expected to subject itself to the shepherds, Heb. 13:7, I Pet. 5:5.
 - e. The elder’s authority is limited to the local church that elected him.
 - 3. Reward

- a. He will have increases in authority, Luke 12:43-44.
- b. He will also have an eternal crown of glory that is not (I Pet. 5:1-4) for all Christians but for the faithful elder.

4. **The deacon**

- a. The Greek word DIAKONOS (translated “deacon”) means “servant”.
 1. In secular Greek it is contrasted with “to rule or have authority”. Greek men aspired to be “bishops” (with authority) but not “deacons” (a job for slaves, women, and animals).
 2. The Greek word DOULOS (translated “bond-slave”) emphasizes one’s relationship to a master while DIAKONOS emphasizes one’s relationship to a task.
 3. In the N.T. DIAKONOS refers to two groups of believers.
 - a. All Christians (in general) who serve the body of Christ. Col. 1:7, I Cor.12:5, I Tim. 1:12, Eph. 4:12.
 - b. A recognized (official) board of ministering servants. Phil. 1:1, I Tim. 3:8-13. Acts 6:1-6 speaks of the appointment of an ethnic group of leaders to help the apostles in the Jerusalem church during its infancy. It is questionable as to whether this is a proto-type of the official deaconate.
- b. Jesus’ teaching on the subject of “serving” will help us understand the responsibility of the deacon.
 1. Serving is an expected way of life for disciples of Christ. We are not to expect respite or reward. Lk.17:7-10.
 2. Serving means that we will take a lower place in the world’s pecking order. Lk.22:27, Jn.13.
 3. In the kingdom of God being least (a servant) is really being greatest (like Jesus). Matt. 20:26-28, Jn.12:24-26.
 4. To serve Christ’s people is to serve Christ. Matt.25:40.
- c. Deacons are to meet specific qualifications. I Tim.3:8-13.
 1. Men of dignity.
 2. Not double-tongued.
 3. Not addicted to much wine.
 4. Not fond of sordid gain.
 5. Holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.
 6. First tested.
 7. Beyond reproach.
 8. Husbands of one wife - faithful to one woman.
 9. Good managers of their children.
- d. Although it is not clear that women were recognized as deaconesses in the N.T. there are two texts that suggest that they might have been. I Tim.3:11 & Rom. 16:1-2 where the term “protectress of many” (a term which connotes some kind of recognized position or authority) is used.

E. **Subjective dynamics of leadership in a congregation.**

- a. Points of tension. Which core value is to have the final say on any particular issue?
 1. There are times when relationships take precedent over principles.

2. There are times when principles take precedent over relationships.
 3. The wisdom is to know what to compromise, when to compromise, how far to compromise, and for what to compromise.
- b. Most decisions are made with some respect being given to four areas of influence.
1. What does your **purpose** mandate?
 2. What do our **principles** dictate?
 3. What enjoys **popular** support at this time?
 4. What is **pragmatically** possible?
- c. The CHBC has adopted the following pattern in its leadership.
1. Plurality of elders with authority to rule and responsibility to pastor.
 2. Congregational participation in major decisions along with ownership of vision and ministry.
 3. No one “senior pastor” position.
 4. Consensus among leaders needed for change.

Questions that you should be able to answer.

1. Specific facts you should know.

- a. What are four major forms of church government?
- b. What are some of the differences between “high church” and “low church” worship?
- c. What is the difference in meaning between elder, bishop, pastor, and deacon?

2. Issues that you should be able to discuss.

- a. How are we to evaluate the Roman Catholic understanding of Peter’s role in the early church?
- b. How should elders be selected in the local church?
- c. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the four forms of church government?

3. Questions you should wrestle with.

- a. What is the best form of church government in our culture?
- b. How should a congregation identify its leaders?