

For the Record: Church Government Briefly Considered

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This regular feature is an attempt to provide an elementary Biblical analysis of various topics in Christian theology and practice. We anticipate that this and future contributions will be helpful in explaining fundamental theological issues to those who may be relatively unfamiliar with them. In this installment, Dr. Greg Bahnsen provides a clear and succinct case for a presbyterian form of church government.

An Inescapable Issue

Questions about how the church ought to be governed are not hot topics of conversation in American Christianity. You don't hear much about the subject or read of it in the latest religious magazines. Positions which people take on the issues which are in vogue, however, are often strongly influenced by their view of church government (whether they know it or not).

Everyone has some notion about how the church should be governed -- about who should make decisions, what procedures should be followed, the kind of authority that characterizes those decisions or procedures, etc. Just suggest that things be done your way in the church, and you will find out soon enough that others have their own ideas too!

Who determines how the church's contributions should be spent? When should we have a church dinner? Who should preach next Sunday? What should be expected in his (her?) preaching? How does the church pursue reconciliation between offended brothers? How are disputes between disagreeing parties resolved? Who should administer baptism? When? How? Who in particular makes sure the sick are visited or the needs of the elderly are met? Is there any voting involved in answering these questions? Who qualifies to vote on them? Practical questions like these and others cannot be avoided.

An Important Issue

You will hear people say, without much reflection, that the government of the church is a relatively trivial matter, not something over which loving Christians should worry or argue. But then on the other hand, if you take a hard look around you at what *actually happens* in various churches, you will notice that the most *prevalent* reason why people get upset and leave a congregation is not really because of doctrinal differences, but is tied in one fashion or another to the way that congregation was governed or disciplined (or not disciplined). People get fed up, disputes are not peacefully resolved, regular oversight and counseling are not pursued, congregations argue and divide -- all because the biblical blueprint for government and discipline has been ignored.

Because many churches have not heeded the Scriptures with respect to government and discipline, the history of the Christian church reveals abuses and disappointments in the administration of church affairs -- from despotic unity to democratic chaos.

The question of how the church should be governed, then, is indeed important, whether ignored by modern believers or not. Today's indifference to issues of church government is at odds with the attitudes of the New Testament church. Just read its early history (Acts) and its correspondence (epistles).

During the early history of the church, for example, Luke found it relevant to relate that the money contributed to the church was under the control of its overseers (Acts 4:35). Later in Acts 15, Luke records a significant account of how the early church resolved a doctrinal dispute by convening a general assembly of its elders -- and then authoritatively publishing their decision for the whole church (vv.22-29).

The author of Hebrews made an explicit point of exhorting believers to submit to the authority of their leaders as those who watch for their souls (13:17). Christ in Revelation 2:2 commended the Ephesian church for disciplining the congregation. John wrote that all churches should do likewise (2 John 10-11), especially with respect to false teaching.

If the church is to emulate the New Testament pattern, Christians simply cannot deny or ignore the importance of oversight in the life, activities, and affairs of the church.

Who, then, should have this oversight and leadership? Any Biblical answer must begin by stating that Jesus Christ is the Head of the church, its Lord and Savior (Eph. 1:22-24; 5:23-24; Col. 1:18). Ultimately, He is the one who governs and disciplines His church. All other authority *in* the church is delegated from Him and is, *for that very reason*, not to be ignored.

How does Christ direct and govern His church? After all, He is not bodily present to make decisions and give audible guidance. Moreover, special divine revelation is not provided every time we wish to visit the sick, resolve a dispute, determine questions of doctrine or buy a light bulb for the church office.

Three Patterns of Church Government

How does Jesus Christ, the supreme authority in the church, govern the day-to-day details of His body? Through the history of the church we have seen the development and constant reappearance of three basic patterns of church government: episcopalianism, congregationalism, and presbyterianism.

1. **Episcopalianism** (or "prelacy") is the rule of the church by monarchical bishops. That is, one man may govern those under him (whether members or other elders), and he need not be chosen by the people to be their leader, but can be appointed by a higher agency. Authority thus rests in *the one* human priest at the top (a pope or archbishop), is then communicated to his sub-ordinates, and extends from there over all of the congregations.
2. **Congregationalism** (or better "independency") is the rule of the church by every member and the independence of every congregation from all others. Authority now rests with *the many* at the bottom. Technically speaking, for any given decision which the church may make, every member within the congregation has the same authority as every other; ruling boards are simply an administrative convenience (whose decisions can be overturned by the congregation as a whole). More-over, no individual congregation is subject to external jurisdiction; associations of churches are voluntary and have no independent power over the internal affairs of their member churches.
3. **Presbyterianism** is the rule of the church by multiple, elected elders -- not the dictates of one man, nor those of the whole congregation. These elders must be chosen by the people from among themselves (men to whom they are willing to vow submission), but also examined and confirmed by the present governing board of elders in the congregation or regional body of elders (the presbytery). All congregations are connected with each other under the jurisdiction of the presbytery, and all presbyteries are connected under the jurisdiction of the "general assembly" of elders from the entire church -- thus allowing a system of graded courts for the purposes of appeal and redress of errors made in subordinate ruling bodies.

The Biblical Pattern

Christ directs his church through the Scriptures, His own self-revelation and authoritative guidance. Let me offer here a brief summary of the Biblical material which I believe is relevant to determining how Christ would have His church governed. The Bible is not silent on this matter.

1. There is no distinction between "elders" and "bishops" (Titus 1:5-7; Acts 20:17,28); these represent the same office and order.
2. Each congregation and center of leadership is to have a plurality of elders (Acts 14:23; 20:17; Phil. 1:1), not one-man rule.
3. These elders have oversight of the church (Acts 20:28; I Pet. 5:2-3) and are thus responsible to rule the congregation (I Tim. 3:5; 5:17; I Thess. 5:12; Heb. 13:7, 17, 24). They judge among the brothers (cf. I Cor. 6:5) and, in contrast to all the members, they do the rebuking (I Tim. 5:20). Christ calls them to use the "keys of the kingdom" to bind and loose (Matt. 16:19; 18:18; John 20: 23) -- these keys being the preaching of the gospel (I John 1:3), administering of the sacraments (Matt. 28:19-20; I Cor. 11: 23ff.), and the exercise of discipline (Matt. 18:17; I Cor. 5:1-5).
4. The elders are assisted in their ministry by "deacons" who give attention to the ministry of mercy (Phil. 1:1; Acts 6:1-6; cf. I Tim. 3:8-13).
5. The office-bearers in the church are nominated and elected by the members of the congregation (e.g. Acts 6:5-6), but must also be examined, confirmed and ordained by the present board of elders (Acts 6:6; 13:1-3; I Tim. 4:14).
6. Members of the church have the right to appeal disputed matters in the congregation to their elders for resolution, and if the dispute is with those local elders, to appeal to the regional governing body (the presbytery) or, beyond that, to the whole general assembly (Acts 15). The decisions of the wider governing bodies are authoritative in all the local congregations (Acts 15:22-23, 28, 30; 16:1-5).

In my opinion, the spectacular mega-churches of our day are rarely governed in the way mentioned in point 3 above. Points 1 and 2 do not comport with the practice of those churches with episcopalian patterns of rule (Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, etc.). Points 5 and 6 are neglected by independent congregations (Baptists, Fundamentalist Bible churches, etc.). It is in the essentials of presbyterian government, found today in various Reformed churches, that we find the above Biblical points coming to their best expression.