

Navigating the Change
Toward Biblical Church Government
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MOL 641 Philosophy of Leadership
June 15, 2005

One of the great questions confronting Christians today is that of church governance. Who should have the authority? Does Scripture allow for a variety of models? What is the biblical mandate for church leadership? Styles range from having one man in total control by authoritarian rule to having the entire congregation voting in a democratic fashion. Not unlike many countries across the political landscape of the last few centuries, churches are wrestling through the fundamental question of how they ought to be governed. Many young preachers are emerging from seminary grasping tightly to the particular form of church government that was described and defended by their professors and having a propensity to pour their new congregation into their neatly defined and tightly drawn model. The aim of this article is to provide an overview of the various church government models in use, to assess how church governments may align with current leadership theories, to examine the Scriptural teaching on church government, and to guide the practitioner in navigating the change toward a more theologically and biblically sound form of church government.

Any organization which stays together long enough must eventually come to agreement on how it is to be governed. It should be noted that throughout history, each successive age saw a particular form rise to prominence that was generally patterned after the political government of the time of its origin. Thus, the Roman Catholic Church takes the form of Imperial Rome. The Lutheran and Anglican churches were originally State Churches and were closely affiliated with the government. In America, democracy was achieved, and churches such as the Baptists, Congregationalists and a multitude of smaller sects were organized and characterized by the idea of autonomy. Most modern churches tend to fall into one of three main categories, each of which has its strengths and weaknesses.

The first of these is a form of pastor rule. Whether it is the preacher in a local congregation or the pope presiding over millions of global congregants, this type of church government puts a single man in ultimate authority over church doctrine and practice. In a smaller church, this allows the decision-making process to be streamlined and leadership to be empowered to be quick and decisive. The direction of the organization may be fairly predictable and some people may prefer not having to make difficult choices for themselves. However, when the body is dependent on the judgment of one man, the results can be disastrous. The system does not encourage input from multiple counselors and tends to have a limited view of any situation. One man alone has the tendency to lose track of the people and their needs and, without building a shared vision, may find himself leading with no one following. With often little or no accountability, the leader in a pastor rule situation is very susceptible to temptation, particularly to the deadly sin of pride. Perhaps the biggest weakness of this form of church government is the lack of any credible support for it in the New Testament.

The second main category is a form of congregational rule. In this model, the majority opinion controls the doctrine and practice of the local church, making people feel they are or can be part of the decision-making process. This can lead to a sense of personal accountability and responsibility and allow people to be better informed about the direction and decisions of the church. Congregational rule also provides a broader pool of information and more stability resulting from the input of a group. Additionally, the church may be better equipped to identify needs in the congregation and is not crippled by an ineffective or ungodly board or leader. However, a vocal minority has been known to derail congregations from a biblically and theologically sound path. Less trained, less dedicated, less capable or less mature people may sway the whole group, while anger, prejudice and favoritism can more easily influence decisions.

There is often an assumption made in congregational churches that the majority is always right. Such a form of church government can lend itself to questioning or outright rejecting any form of authority and frequently confuses the roles of deacons and elders. Arguments can be made that the New Testament recognizes democracy in church leadership with phrases such as “[t]he statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose...” (Acts 6:5) and “[t]hen it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose...” (Acts 15:22). Congregational rule is particularly appealing to twenty-first century American culture which puts the utmost of emphasis on individual liberties and democracy as a utopian ideal. However, it must be understood that democracy is not a biblical imperative and Christian liberty can never be opposed to the truth that God reveals in His word.

The third main category is elder rule. This form seems to have the most support from the New Testament model and carries with it a combination of the same strengths and weaknesses inherent in the other two extremes. When functioning properly, a strong, godly board of elders gives strong, godly guidance to the church. Rather than the directions and decisions of the church being set by vocal individuals during business meetings, a unified board of elders brings a multiplicity of ideas, experience, and training, giving credibility to the decisions. Continuity of leadership often results in stability for the fellowship, and more effective shepherding of the flock is facilitated when several share the responsibility. However, it is very possible for elder boards to lose touch with the congregation, to foster an unrealistic expectation to carry out every aspect of the church ministry, and to perpetuate a spiritual rut in a fellowship. If elders are not unified, the congregation can be polarized quickly by following individual elders based on their personal bias, and the elder board can be used as a platform for personal vendetta or agenda.

With each of these main categories of church government, the primary issue is around power to control. In pastor rule, the power ultimately rests in the authority bestowed on or assumed by the single man. This form of government can be identified with several of the trait theories of leadership. Some of the models in the Episcopalian tradition (such as Anglican, Methodist, Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches) demonstrate the Great-Man Theory, in which power is vested in a very limited number of people (Covey, 352). They maintain that there are three legitimate church offices: bishops, presbyters (or rectors or priests), and deacons. The bishops alone have authority to appoint other bishops, presbyters, and deacons. Some Episcopalians trace the authority of the bishop back to the apostles (apostolic succession); others trace the bishop's authority to church history; and still others claim no historic succession. Some of the models in the Baptist tradition with a single pastor government tend toward the Charismatic Leadership Theory, in which authority is not an entitlement but rather granted based on how the followers perceive the leader (Covey, 356). Pastor rule can also be associated with Psychoanalysis Theories in which the leader functions as a father figure (Covey, 353).

In congregational rule, the power lies in the capacity of a group to gain dominance. This form of church government might be better identified with the Power-Influence approach to leadership, which includes a participative role for followers who possess more knowledge than the leaders (Covey, 355). The roots of Congregationalism can be traced to Puritans in the seventeenth century hoping to transform the Church of England. The predecessors of many modern Baptist, Evangelical Free, and Mainline Pentecostal churches believed in the priesthood of all believers and thus that the leadership of elders or bishops was unnecessary. In many ways, organizations following this form of government reflect the theories of Aspirational and Visionary Leadership, in which emphasis is placed on communicating common values and

creating an environment for achieving a shared vision (Covey, 356). Other newer groups, and particularly those in the Purpose-Driven movement, rely on the theories Managerial and Strategic Leadership, in which followers are aligned and motivated in a collective effort toward some meaningful direction (Covey, 357).

However, in elder rule, power is not assumed by hierarchical tradition or achieved by ability to influence, but rather is based on God's calling to leadership. This probably most closely reflects the Spiritual Leadership theory, which involves influencing and caring for souls rather than controlling action (Covey, 358). The model can be traced back to the first century church and was patterned after the Jewish synagogue. After they were driven out of the local assembly for their faith in Christ and deprived of its community structure, New Testament believers responded by forming synagogues of their own. They adopted the organizational structure of the Jewish system to these new assemblies and engaged in Scripture reading, exposition and exhortation, prayer, fellowship and the selection of elders and deacons. This model saw resurgence in the second generation of Reformers, most notably under John Calvin. He believed strongly that the church needed to be reorganized to follow the pattern of New Testament church government and advocated for categories of offices including pastors, teachers, rulers and deacons. Calvin's proposal, modified and published by the Church of Geneva, became the model of church government for Reformed churches throughout Europe.

Is an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of each category of church rule truly helpful in determining how to organize a congregation? Can an understanding of the leadership theory supporting a given form of church government add value to the discussion of how to structure the church? Perhaps, but the real question at stake for the believer should be around what is prescribed in Scripture. Christians who hold the Bible up as the fully authoritative and

totally infallible Word of God must agree that their church practices and doctrines are established on the teachings of the Bible. However, contemporary scholars are not unanimous on this point. Some would argue the New Testament is ambiguous or silent on the form of church government and that no one structure is divinely ordained. They concede that their form is merely the product of pragmatic developments in their history. Donald Miller asserts:

“Any form... which the Holy Spirit can inhabit and to which He may impart the life of Christ, must be accepted as valid for the church. As all forms of life adapt themselves to their environment, so does the life of Christ by His Spirit in the church.” (Saucy, 105).

However, others maintain that theirs is the only legitimate model as it is based on the pattern described in Scripture. They argue that the issue of church government is a crucial factor in determining how people think and act. Alexander Strauch stresses this point:

“Some of the worst havoc wrought to the Christian faith has been a direct result of unscriptural forms of church structure. Only a few centuries after the apostles’ death, for example, Christ’s churches began to assimilate both Roman and Jewish concepts of status, power, and priesthood.... Under Christ’s name an elaborately structured institution emerged that corrupted the simple, family structure of the apostolic churches, robbed God’s people of their lofty position and ministry in Christ, and exchanged Christ’s supremacy over His people for the supremacy of the institutional church.” (Strauch, 101).

A cursory study of the New Testament demonstrates that the model for church government is not the product of a mere divine suggestion nor served up menu-style to choose a form that suits individual needs. Rather, it can be reasonably demonstrated that Scripture mandates church government by a plurality of elders. Together, the New Testament writers mention elders, overseers and shepherds in reference to church leadership more than twenty-five times in the Gospels and the Epistles. The basis, selection, office, character, functions, attitude

and qualifications of elders are clearly laid out and the pattern established early and often so as to leave little room for confusion. Strauch writes, “In fact, the New Testament offers more instruction regarding elders than on any other important church subjects such as the Lord’s Supper, the Lord’s Day, baptism or spiritual gifts.” (Strauch, 103).

For example, Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4; and 21:18 demonstrate that elders had a significant role in the Jerusalem church and the Jerusalem council. In reference to churches in Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, Acts 14:23 demonstrates Paul’s pattern of appointing elders as a key step in organizing a new church. Paul spoke directly to the elders in Acts 20:17 and warned them in 20:28 to “[b]e on guard for [them]selves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made [them] overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” Each of these passages points to an early understanding that God’s intent for church leadership was by a plurality of elders. Instruction about elders is given to the churches in I Thessalonians 5:12-13; I Timothy 3:1-7, 10 and 5:17-22, 24-25; Titus 1:5-9; Hebrews 13:17; James 5:14; and I Peter 5:5. Instruction is given to elders about churches in I Thessalonians 5:13; James 5:14; and I Peter 5:1-5. In the majority of the references the word for elders is plural and word for church is singular, indicating a very clear directive that the church should be governed by a plurality of elders.

Turning attention toward the specific words used in the original languages sheds significant light on the nature of the teaching about these divinely appointed church leaders. The most commonly used word is πρεσβυτερος (presbuteros, Strong’s number 4245) which refers twenty-eight times in the Gospels and Acts to the members of the Jewish Sanhedrin and twelve times in Revelation to the representatives of the redeemed people of God. The remaining nineteen times the word is employed in Acts and the Epistles, it identifies a unique group of

leaders in the church. The term simply means advanced in age, but in the first century context indicates a rank or office among Jews as members of the ruling council, among Greeks as those who those who managed public affairs and administered justice, and among Christians as those who presided over the local assemblies. While no specific age is given, this term emphasizes the character of the elder and implies maturity, dignity, experience, and honor (Strauch, 125).

The second Greek word used to describe the office is *επισκοπος* (*episkopos*, Strong's number 1985), which is a common word for in the Greek culture for any official who acted as a superintendent, manager, controller, curator, guardian or ruler. It occurs only five times in the New Testament, once referring to Christ (1 Peter 2:25) and the other four times to church leaders. This term emphasizes the function of an elder as exercising authority and supervision "by divine placement, initiative and design." (Strauch, 148).

The third word is applied only once in the noun form to elders as *ποιμεν* (*poimen*, Strong's number 4166) or shepherds. The verb form is also used three times in the New Testament in the context of church leaders. This term emphasizes the heart attitude of an elder as one who tends, feeds, guides, protects and cares for his flock (Strauch, 149). While the three different words offer perspective on who the man is, what he does and how he does it, it is important to note that the words are used synonymously and refer to the same office and person. In I Timothy and Titus, Paul drafts nearly identical lists of qualifications for elder and overseer, while Peter draws all three concepts together in one passage: "Therefore, I exhort the elders among you...shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight..." (I Peter 5:1-2). Luke uses the terms elder, overseer and shepherd interchangeably in Acts 20.

The clear teaching of Scripture places elders at the center of the church's work, bestowing a great amount of responsibility and authority as the highest level of local church

leadership. Even though modern evangelicalism often views elder rule with suspicion, it remains inarguable that the biblical norm for church government is a plurality of elders. According to Heifetz, people expect those in authority to provide several basic social functions, including direction, protection, orientation, control of conflict and maintenance of norms (Heifetz, 69). The qualified elder will be well-suited to meet these expectations as he fulfills the role in which God has placed him and helps his flock to navigate the change toward a more biblical church government. A plurality of elders will help provide vision, goals and strategy that are aligned with sound doctrine. They will scan the environment and warn of false teaching that may threaten the church. Godly elders will be excellent in their communication so that the congregation has a good understanding of the decisions that are made and how consensus was reached. They will administer consistent church discipline and quickly quash ungodly talk that is so cancerous to the body. Finally, a well-functioning church government will faithfully preach and teach, knowing how to rightly divide the Word of truth.

With the deeply ingrained ideals of democracy and a long history of congregational church government, it is no small task to steer a church toward a right understanding of biblical elder rule. However, it is incumbent on anyone who rests in the authority and sufficiency of God's infallible Word to believe that His way is best and only by following His pattern will He receive the most glory and the church best be able to fulfill its mission.

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