

Faith Pulpit

Doing Church God's Way

Issues of church government continue to dominate much of the thinking and practice of contemporary churches. Misconceptions concerning roles of congregations, deacons, and pastors reduce churches to confusion, conflict, and inertia.

Several key questions arise that demand answers. Why do we need church leaders in the first place? Some argue that if Christ is truly Head of His Church, and if all believers are Spirit-controlled, organization is superfluous. Others believe that organization is death to a “spiritual” ministry.

But a biblically-defined government is mandated for the following reasons:

1. The high priestly prayer of Jesus. John 10:30 declares that Christ and the Father are One. That relationship is clarified in Luke 22:41, John 4:34, and John 8:29. It is clear that the doctrine of dominion that appears consistently throughout Scripture, beginning with man's dominion over creation and continuing with the husband's role as the leader of his wife, finds its roots in the Godhead. There are leaders in all of God's creation, and there is also subordination. It should be no surprise that Christ is building His church the same way.
2. The provision of gifted men. Paul makes clear in Ephesians 4 that God has provided pastor/teachers to be saint equippers. Not everybody or just anybody is selected.
3. The imperatives to obey. Hebrews 13:7 admonishes believers to “remember them which have the rule over you.” Literally, this refers to “those who are leading the way.” These are leaders who are preachers and teachers of the Word of God those whom the believers are to “follow.” Hebrews 13:17 commands believers to “obey them that have the rule over you and submit yourselves.” The word obey means to assent. It is the duty of those who hear the pastor/teachers preach the Word to bring themselves into an attitude of mental and spiritual agreement. The second imperative is to “submit

yourselves.” Literally it means to “yield under.” This refers to attitude more than performance. In classical usage it meant to give way or to yield to authority.

The reason for the obedience and submission is that God holds the leaders responsible for the church “as they that must give account.” The goal is for the positive attitude of the congregation to provide motivation for the pastors to do their work with joy.

4. The example of the early church. The principles and application of church government are seen in early church history (Acts 6) as well as in other Scriptures. Deacons are in the second and subordinate rank of office in the New Testament. They have a major and serious responsibility to the local church but are never seen in Scripture as ruling. Their role is serving at the delegation of the pastor/teachers.

Since we are to have church government, what form should it take? Where does the power to govern lie? Is that power in a congregation or in a board or in some self-appointed “leaders”? When the authority, appointment, and duties of church leaders are understood, then the New Testament ideal is realized. The key person in church government is the pastor. His function, qualifications, and ordination become incredibly important. In function, the pastor is a bishop (1 Tim. 3:1) who has the responsibility to “oversee” the ministry of the local church. He is also an elder or one who is spiritually mature. The terms bishop and elder exegetically and historically refer to the same person. In addition, he is a pastor, one who has the responsibility to “shepherd” his people. Nobody else in a local church has this function.

How important it is, then, for that pastor to be uniquely a man of God (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1)! He must desire the office (1 Tim. 3:1). Literally, he must covet it. Part of his call to pastoral ministry is the subjective desire placed in his heart by God that he must follow. He wants it, and he works toward it.

He must be a godly example. Contrary to the thinking of too many pastors, pulpit committees, and church members, character is the dominant prerequisite for pastoral ministry. Virtually all of the qualifications listed in the key passages are related to character, including “apt to teach,” which may be translated “teachable.” Sending churches, schools, and ordination councils should spend far more time assessing character qualifications of a pastor than they do. Doctrinal excellence and practical application are important but become useless and divisive if not driven by character.

He must also be ordained. And only God ordains. The choice begins with the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28), and it proceeds to other leaders (Acts 14:23). The leaders nominate (ordain in a secondary sense), and the local church approves the nomination upon examination (2 Cor. 8:18, 19). The appointment of leaders in Titus 1:5 strongly suggests a superior appointing a subordinate. Exactly the same usage occurs in Acts 6:3. It becomes clear that biblical leadership comes directly from God. The leader must desire the office, and he must demonstrate qualifications for it. In addition, his office and call are recognized by a local church and existing leaders. If God has specially chosen certain men to rule over

the church, it is equally clear that serious guidelines are placed on the man. He must be a man of God in a very unique sense. He must be worthy of being followed if he is to lead.

Terminology becomes critically important when discussing church government. What role does a congregation have? A deacon? Significantly, the Bible says nothing of democracy or even representative democracy. “Rule” implies authority and responsibility. And nowhere does Scripture teach congregational rule. It does, however, argue eloquently for congregational participation. For instance, the church participates in church discipline, doctrinal questions, missionary selection and enterprise, the selection of deacons, and charitable ministries. On a more practical level, the phrase congregational form of government might be more appropriate. This phrase does not argue for rule, but for careful, submissive participation in the day-to-day ministry of the church, ministering, and helping the pastor(s) to bring the church under the rule of Christ and His Word. And, therefore, in the context of church government there is great need for churches to see the church as His church (Matt. 16), under His rule as expressed in Scripture, and under His appointed leadership. Strictly speaking, church government is not a democracy of any sort. Nor is it a dictatorship (pick your dictator!), or an oligarchy, or monarchy. It is a theocracy. It is, in the final analysis, His church. He bought it, He owns it, He rules it, He grows it, and He blesses it. And His manual is His Word.

Sadly, a survey of contemporary culture reveals an almost total lack of understanding. In the place of Scripture, churches have constructed boards to rule their affairs. Too often boards are established that have dominion over every facet of a church’s life, including its pastor(s). Situations like this have grown out of a natural metamorphosis. At the heart of the problem is a lack of biblical training. Pastors either have not been trained to teach the Word to their people concerning this subject, or they have abrogated that role for the sake of expediency. Also, the constant movement of pastors from church to church leaves boards and self-appointed rulers more firmly entrenched than ever. An incoming pastor does well to discover, in advance if possible, where the “power” is in his church. If the prevailing viewpoint is not biblical, his tenure can easily become brief and stormy.

Wherever the power to govern (rule) is, this much is certain: The one who rules must desire the office, manifest consistent godly character, be thoroughly trained for his ministry, and receive the approbation of other elders and the church at large. Anything less invites disaster, or at least reduces the church’s role to peace-keeping and balancing out factions in the assembly. Let’s be biblical!

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