

SETTING THINGS IN ORDER

AN EXAMINATION OF THE BIBLICAL FORMAT FOR CHURCH ADMINISTRATION

by David E. Moss

Introduction

At the moment the church began, its governmental structure consisted of twelve apostles within a group of one hundred and twenty faithful people (Acts 2). Before the first day was over, 3000 converts were added. Soon there were 5000 men besides women and children and more and more were added to Christ daily so that by Acts chapter six, (perhaps only a matter of weeks or months) there was quite a sizeable multitude all in one local church. There were so many, in fact, that the apostles could not possibly do all the necessary work to care for them. Others were chosen to assume some of that responsibility in lesser roles, and this marked the beginning of the organizing of Christ's body.

Later, God would provide some regulations to the format for church administration. He would ordain offices, designate their qualifications and throughout the New Testament provide information for the church to understand how those officers were to function.

Today, church government comes in many varieties. To some degree this may not be bad. God has always enjoyed creativity and variety. Just look at creation to see that this is so. On the other hand, God has made some very specific statements about order in the church and if the Word is followed, one would think a strong element of uniformity could be observed among local churches. Unfortunately, this is not so.

In Protestant and Independent churches, officers generally fall under the titles of bishop, pastor, elder, deacon, or trustee and are arranged in every possible combination. One church may have pastors and deacons, another may have pastors, elders, and deacons, or pastors, deacons and trustees, or pastors, elders, and trustees, or pastors and elders, etc. Bishop is usually a title found only in denominations and conferred upon regional officers.

The use of the same titles among churches does not mean they represent the same offices, however. Sometimes deacons function like elders, or sometimes they function like trustees. Sometimes trustees function like elders, or elders function like deacons or trustees. There seems to be a great deal of difference of opinion concerning what God intended for the organization of the church

Added to the mix is the more modern innovation of Congregationalism. This is a form of church government which puts all ultimate authority in the hands of the entire church membership by means of a democratic process. Even this concept is not uniform among churches. Some use a pure form of Congregationalism while others mix it with some form of officer groupings which have partial authority in varying degrees.

Finally, there are churches which create their own titles or governmental concepts. They may have a church council, or a group of committees, or an official board, or any number of other innovations. In some cases it may be one of a kind.

This essay is a humble attempt to define some Biblical concepts concerning the offices and duties which God intended within the organization of the church. Perhaps it will help clarify some of the issues involved, and not add to the confusion of ideas on the subject.

The church today is still responsible for operating according to Biblical guidelines. In

order to be Biblical, it may be necessary for some to change their modern-day traditional biases. After all, what is more important? Doing what everyone else is doing, following the traditions of men, or obeying God's instruction?

As you consider the following information, weigh it carefully. Allow God's Word to speak in its literal sense. Examine each point objectively. And, may your conclusions encourage you in your participation in the body of Christ.

Modern Forms of Church Administration.

In spite of the variety of combinations of church offices found among churches, there are primarily three forms of administration or government being used today. The three are Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational.

The Episcopal form of church administration focuses authority upon one man as an executive. The word Episcopal comes from the Greek word *episkopos*. It is generally translated as "bishop," though it appears in the Bible as both a noun and a verb. It primarily means "an overseer" or "the act of overseeing." While the denomination that calls itself the Episcopal Church does use this form of church administration, it can also be observed in other denominations and local churches. Episcopal administration is manifested either by regional bishops or by local pastors. Regional bishops have the authority to assign pastors to local churches without the vote of the people and to intervene in the affairs of the local churches under his jurisdiction. Local pastors sometimes exercise the authority to make enforceable decisions concerning the business matters of the local church under his charge. This authority may in some cases be assigned to the pastor by the congregation, but in other cases only be assumed by him.

The Presbyterian form of church administration focuses authority upon a group of men as a legislative body. The word presbytery comes from the Greek word *presbuteros*. It appears much more often in Scripture than does *episkopos* and is almost always translated "elders." Fifty eight out of sixty seven times it is plural. *Presbuteros* means "old" or "older." It was originally a respectful term used for those who had attained a greater age. Then it became a title for those who attained a station of leadership either within a family or within a society. In the context of the church, it was designated as a title for an office of leadership. Its scriptural use being so often in the plural implies elders are to function as a group as opposed to the executive authority exercised by an individual. The Presbyterian Church as a denomination uses this group legislative form of government for their local churches as does any local church which has a group of elders vested with the authority to make and enforce policy.

The Congregational form of church administration focuses authority in the whole assembly by virtue of a democratic process. The word congregation appears hundreds of times in the Old Testament and only once in the New Testament - Acts 13:43. There are several Hebrew synonyms translated congregation. They refer to a large assembly of people gathered for a special purpose in a special place. The one appearance of congregation in the New Testament is a translation of the word *synagogue*. In addition, the Greek word *ekklesia* (church) may be considered a New Testament equivalent. Congregationalism as a form of church government emerged after the reformation as a reaction against the abuses of Episcopal authority. There is no Scripture which directly suggests Congregationalism. However, Scriptural support for the concept may be taken from the passages that describe the body of Christ as consisting of many members, all of whom have equal standing with Christ. Again, there is a denomination which bears "Congregational" as its title and which uses this form of church administration. It is also popular among many Baptist churches, some of which mix the Episcopal and Congregational forms, having strong authoritative Pastors, yet bringing much of the business of the church to a vote before the congregation. Congregationalism is probably the most prevalent form of church administration among Independent churches, though often

not used in a pure form.

The question that arises and which each local church must settle for itself is, “which form of church government will we use?” Many Independent local churches are convinced that Congregationalism is the only legitimate form to follow. Several things outside of the study of Scripture have led to this. The concepts of Episcopal and Presbyterian administrative authority have become frightening because of the abuses of power that have occurred within them. (Their success depends almost entirely on the caliber of men who serve. Unfortunately, many unqualified men have found their way into these offices.) Also, an endearment to the democratic process has grown very strong within the American culture. Many have come to believe that the inalienable rights of the people to speak their mind freely and to decide things by a majority vote are transferable to the life of the church.

The issue is often settled by an extra-biblical rationale, but when human wisdom prevails it usually leads to trouble. The issue must be settled by a serious examination of the teaching of Scripture concerning church administration. As Titus was instructed to set things in order within the Church at Crete, so it is essential that every local church set things in order according to God's instruction, and not according to an emotional reaction against the irresponsible actions of certain individual men.

Biblical Teaching Concerning Church Administration.

What does the Bible teach on this subject? The following is an examination of the various titles used in church government and what the Bible has to say about each one.

1. Bishops and Elders

Are bishops and elders interchangeable titles for the same office or do they represent different offices? The Bible answer is that they speak of different aspects of the same office.

Bishop is a word of action describing the function of overseeing. In its noun form it is found as *bishop* or *overseer* where it refers to a person who oversees (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; I Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:7; I Peter 2:25). As a noun, it also appears as *bishoprick* or *oversight*, referring to the area of oversight for which the person is responsible (Acts 1:20; I Timothy 3:1; Luke 19:44; I Peter 2:12). In its verb form it is found as *exercising oversight*, referring to the act of oversight being performed (I Peter 5:2).

Elder is a title designating a position of authority. It occurs many times in Scripture, but only in three different contexts: 1- The elders of Israel (Matthew 28:12; Mark 14:53, 15:1); 2- The elders of age (Luke 15:25; John 8:9; Acts 2:17); 3- The elders of the church (Acts 14:23, 20:17; Titus 1:5).

These two words do refer to the same office, one as a title and the other as a description of responsibility. God ordained that men would rule in the church, that is, provide guidance and care in the ministry to Christ's body. These men were given the authoritative title of elder so that they would be respected as they fulfilled their function of oversight. This is clearly stated in I Peter 5:1-3 where the elders (*presbuteros*) were exhorted to take the oversight (*episkopos*) of the church, willingly and of a ready mind.

The office corresponds with something to which Israel had been accustomed for sometime. Elders had long been responsible for relaying to the people what God expected and guaranteeing that it was accomplished. Unfortunately, by the time Christ came to earth the elders of Israel had so abused their office and authority that they actually became part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

Because of the grave responsibility overseeing is, special instruction was given regarding the qualifications one must meet for assuming such a position in the church (I Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:7-9). Just as one does not grow wise and elderly overnight, neither does he qualify for the church eldership easily. To be an elder and provide oversight for Christ's body must be considered a high calling and great privilege. The office must not be assumed lightly.

2. Pastors

The word pastor is never suggested as a title for an office by the Bible. Instead, it is listed as one of the gifts to the church (Ephesians 4:11). The Greek word is *poimen* (pronounced poymain) and means shepherd. As a noun it appears seventeen times in the New Testament and is translated as *shepherd* sixteen of those times. In addition, it occurs eleven times as a verb and refers to the act of shepherding either by feeding the flock, or taking charge of their welfare.

Today, *pastor* is generally used as the title for the chief officer of the church. Some insist that the titles "pastor" and "elder" are synonymous and that only ordained pastors qualify to be elders. While all elders are admonished to be involved in shepherding (I Peter 5:2), no Scripture explicitly states that all elders are given the gift of pastoring. All elders are involved in ruling but not all elders are involved in teaching (I Timothy 5:17).

Biblically, the word *pastor* describes a function not an office. It is a functional gift of the Holy Spirit given to some of the elders and a functional activity in which others may participate who do not necessarily have the spiritual gift of pastoring.

In the true Biblical sense, a pastor is an elder to whom God has given the spiritual gift of pastoring and whom the church has decided is worthy of spending all his energy in fulfilling this calling. A church hires a pastor-elder and agrees to provide for his temporal needs so that he can be free from other employment (I Corinthians 9:1-14; I Timothy 5:17-18). A pastor is an elder who does the work of pastoring. If a man tries to do this full time and has not been given the spiritual gift of pastoring by the Holy Spirit, he will find it a very laborious task.

3. Deacons

The word deacon is a transliteration of a Greek word that means *servant*. Long before it was used as a title for a church office, it was a very common word with many applications in relationship to the concept of serving others. It appears in three forms in the New Testament: 1- as a noun referring to a function (*service*); 2- as a noun referring to the one performing the function (*servant*); 3- as a verb referring to the performance of the function (*servicing*). It occurs a little more than one hundred times in the New Testament and is translated in a variety of ways such as *deacon, servant, minister, administration, etc.*

Service is the occupation or function of serving, the work or action performed by one that serves (Webster). Scripture applies this word to household service, physical activity such as distributing food and money, and to spiritual service such as missionary work, evangelism, the work of reconciliation, etc.

The Bible portrays many different people serving in a variety of contexts. Christ served the world (Matthew 20:28). Angels served Christ (Matthew 4:11). Paul served the Corinthians (II Corinthians 3:3). Onesiphorus served Paul (II Timothy 1:18). All Christians are supposed to serve one another (I Peter 4:10).

The apostles tried to serve the people along with all of their other duties (Acts 6:2), but because it was so time consuming, they designated other men to do certain kinds of service for the church. This was apparently the beginning of the office of deacon. It would be referred to as an office in I Timothy 3:10.

It is difficult to develop an understanding of the Biblical office of deacon. No where in scripture are the specific duties of the office outlined. In a modern context, nearly every church one may observe has applied the office differently. A word study in the Bible, however, can help us understand some things about deaconing in the church. To deacon is not to take, tell, or rule. biblical characters of authority deaconed not as part of their rulership but as part of their servitude to Christ. To fulfill the office of deacon requires hard work, sacrifice, and total selflessness. It involves both temporal and spiritual matters in meeting the needs of people at the expense of oneself.

Perhaps God intended the duties of this office to be undefinable so that those who deacon would be willing to provide whatever the church needs without the glory of authority and rulership. And perhaps, one would do well to prove himself in the office of deacon before he aspires to the grave responsibility of eldership in the church.

Churches that give deacons the function of ruling have overstepped the parameters of the Biblical concept of deaconing. At the same time, churches that relegate the office of deacon to the management of church property have grossly underestimated the scope of responsibility God intended for those who serve under this title.

4. Trustees

The word trustee is not found in scripture. It is not a Biblical title for an office in the church. It is a modern legal title referring to a person who is legally responsible to administer material property on behalf of someone else such as a charitable organization. Some states have laws requiring that all non-profit organizations within the state have a certain number of trustees who are legally responsible for the management of the material property possessed corporately by that organization.

In Bible times, churches did not own property. The church met in the peoples homes. As the church prospered and gained freedom, it also began to accumulate property and wealth. The legal ramifications of owning property has in modern times caused the church to be grouped with other non-profit organizations as far as lawful regulation is concerned. When states began requiring legal trustees, some local churches began complying by designating their leaders with that title.

While it may not be a spiritual responsibility, it certainly falls under the heading of good stewardship. In fact, there may be good reason for a local church to delegate this responsibility to men of good standing who can relieve both elders and deacons from the duties of this functional task of taking care of church property, freeing them to do the work of the ministry outlined in Scripture.

5. The Congregation

Where does the congregation fit into the framework of government within the local church? Is democracy a body of Christ concept? Is "one member - one vote" God's order for deciding things or does Congregationalism mean something else? Congregationalism was one of the forms the church assumed as a result of the Reformation. It was based upon the belief that each congregation was free to choose its own pastor, determine its own policies,

and manage its own affairs. This view was held by both Puritans (who wished to have this freedom locally while remaining in the state church) and Separatists (who preferred to be independent of any church organization).

Biblically, Congregationalism may be viewed as the best possible way for a local church to express its being the body of Christ -- the composite group of believers -- one spiritual body consisting of many members (I Corinthians 12:12-27; Romans 12:4-5). The question is whether God intended this to be carried over into governing or to be expressed only in spiritual activities. Both the I Corinthians 12 and Romans 12 contexts are speaking of spiritual gifts not the process of making decisions in the church.

The closest the Bible comes to relating the congregation to the act of governing is in Acts six. The apostle instructed the group to "*look ye out among you*" the men that "*we may appoint over this business.*" There is no other place in Scripture where a congregation was involved in a business like decision. All other governing was done first by the apostles, then by the apostles and elders together (Acts 15), then by their representatives like Timothy and Titus (Titus 1), and finally by the elders alone (Acts 20).

Understanding How These Elements Fit Together In the Church

There was a brief time I believed Congregationalism was the correct form of church government. I had changed my mind to think so because I reacted against abuses of power I witnessed by individuals in authority. I saw first hand the disservice this was to the people and the confusion and pain it caused among them. This view was short lived when I saw the other side and realized that there is as much potential for abuse in pure Congregationalism as there is in the other forms of church government. During congregational meetings, unelected members of the congregation can obtain the floor and control the flow of thought with their persuasive speech and their skills in manipulating the emotions of others. The result can be that some fast talking members of the congregation can actually control what decisions are made without having any elective authority. The group ends up thinking that it has decided things by a democratic process when in fact it has been duped by some very unspiritual people.

I learned that deciding which form of church government is correct cannot be based upon experience. It must be based upon truth. What does the Bible really teach?

From the observations that we have made in this article, the following truths must be considered: elders are given the oversight; deacons serve in both spiritual and practical ways but have no oversight authority; pastors are elders to whom God has given the spiritual gift of shepherding people; trustees are a modern innovation necessitated by the ownership of property; the congregation is the body of Christ which has a corporate spiritual function but no designated governing authority.

The true Biblical form of church government, therefore, probably resembles Presbyterianism more than any other, but naming it such is inadequate. Church administration is not human rulership over people but divine rulership through human agency. The church is a theocracy. Christ is the head, the ruler, the decision maker. He chooses members of His body for responsibility and intends for them to direct their activities toward the collective and individual needs of the rest of the body. He also intends for every member of the body to perform their assigned function, thus supplying all that is needed by the effectual working of every part (Ephesians 4:16).

Also, the success of church government depends upon the philosophy with which it is implemented. Success is not achieved by lording it over God's heritage (I Peter 5:3) or through the traditions of men (Mark 7:13). It is accomplished through a willing heart and ready mind (I

Peter 5:2; I Chronicles 28:9), through comfort and consolation (II Corinthians 1:6), through gentleness, patience, meek instruction (II Timothy 2:24-25) and a sense of responsibility to the Chief Shepherd (Hebrews 13:17) in maintaining the spiritual integrity of the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16; II Corinthians 11:2).

Conclusion

No local church should be guilty by following a faulty system merely because it is the way they have always done things. No pastor or other individual should have unchecked executive authority. No elder should be confined to the duties of deaconing. No deacon should be given elder authority. Trustees should never be equivalent to elders or deacons. And, the congregation should never be viewed as a business corporation. None of these things are Biblical.

One factor that makes it difficult for Christians today to understand how a church ought to function is the matter of business versus ministry. There are so many business items upon which churches feel they must decide. Business items generally involve the expenditure of money or procedural policy on how things will be done. So much energy is being spent on these types of things that the members of a congregation have little energy left to do the real work of the church -- ministry.

There may be times when the congregation needs to come together and talk about "things." But if they would submit to the oversight of the elders as God instructed, choose some spirit-filled godly men to serve the welfare of the people as deacons, appoint others to manage the property as trustees and give their pastor the freedom to stick to pastoring, there just might be enough energy among the people in the pew to minister to one another as a body ought to do.

Furthermore, no congregation should resist conforming to Biblical guidelines because they are afraid a small group of people will seize control and impose irresponsible decisions upon them. God provided guidelines for dealing with the unruly, including unruly elders.

In addition, no local church should deprive itself of the benefits of having all the jobs filled that the Bible describes. Eldering, deaconing, pastoring and stewardship management are all necessary to the health of the body.

Finally, no local church should be guilty of not functioning as a spiritual body. Churches that accomplish something meaningful for the cause of Christ are those who understand they are not businesses, run by the majority opinion of the stock holders. Rather, they understand themselves to be spiritual bodies, governed by Christ, guided by human agencies within the body, and designed to do some mighty, spiritual works called ministry.

Church government, in fact, is less government than it is spiritual function. It is too bad that the language of the church has become entangled with the political philosophy of the secular world. What each local church needs to do is sort through all the political terminology, all the constitutional configurations, and all the ways "we have always done it" and ask itself the simple question, "What does the Bible say we ought to be doing?"