

Order in the Courts

Biblical Thoughts on Church Government

Christians who attend independent churches are often faced with questions regarding the congregational life of our specific church. In areas like East Tennessee, where a vast majority of the local churches are Baptist of some form or other, the idea of not having the entire congregation vote on most major issues is viewed with some amount of suspicion. The idea of daily business decisions, such as building new buildings, purchasing of vehicles and real property or hiring and dismissal of church employees being made by one person and not a board or committee is viewed with similar distrust. In other areas like the Northeast where the predominant form of Christendom is more along Episcopal lines, the idea of going to a church that is not affiliated with a larger group is viewed askance. Given this, it seems prudent to take a look at the Bible's teachings on how a local church is to be properly operated. Before we begin, a word on usage is in order: when capitalized, Church refers to the universal body of Christian believers or a particular denomination, and when not capitalized, church refers to a local organized body of believers. The key principle that must be understood before discussing any form of church government is the very nature of God. God is a God of order, organization and reason Who works according to exact and discernible scientific principles. Offspring are placed under their parents, atoms decay at an exact and predictable pace, the Sun and Moon rise and set at predictable times and have predictable cycles, the stars move regularly through their courses, light travels at a precise speed and countless tens of thousands of other actions happen regularly and predictably.

While we can tell that this God of order, organization and reason exists through His ordered creation, it is only reasonable to conclude He has given us a standard to know Him personally by. God would be acting entirely contrary to His precise nature to not provide a standard whereby man might know Him apart from personal intuition and physical perception and an agency of influence to put that standard into practice. God has done just this through His Word, the Bible, and through His agency in the universe, the Church.

While made up of imperfect human beings, the Church has had an undeniably positive influence on civilization over the last two millennia. Examples of this positive influence include the Catholic Church's preservation of scientific knowledge during the Dark Ages, the hospital, and the American Revolution. What little scientific knowledge that existed in the West at the fall of the Roman Empire was collected in the high mountains of Ireland in Catholic monasteries, and this fascinating story is detailed in a book called "How The Irish Saved Civilization". The story of the hospital is that of an outreach of the Church to society; the public hospital was one of the earliest homeless outreaches. Finally, the story of the American Revolution is a testimony of the Church as positive

political influence on society. During that conflict, Great Britain's King George III called the Patriots "that ****ed lot of Presbyterians" and the British military called the American clergy the "Black Regiment" in reference to their very active role in the conflict and the color of clerical garb of the era; some ministers of the Gospel even served as Generals in the Continental Army.

Despite the positive influence of the Church, it would be illogical for God to have provided an agent of influence without a uniform standard for faith and practice to implement it. To use a phrase from H. L. Mencken, the Church without the Bible to guide it would be little more than a "club vaguely devoted to good works." Some might say there are many ways to God, but this would be in direct opposition to God's precise nature. He fashioned the cesium atom to decay at such an exact rate that a clock regulated by its decay will be accurate to within an infinitesimal fraction of a second, the planets He formed follow exact courses in the heavens, chemicals when combined in certain fashions will always produce the exact same result, and light will always travel at the exact same velocity in a vacuum. God's Creation, the Universe, is a silent evangelist for His ordered, precise nature (see Romans 1:20).

His nature of order, organization and reason is further seen in His Word, the Bible. The Bible consists of 66 Books written by over 30 different authors who mostly did not even know each other. Written over roughly 2,000 years of history by authors separated by thousands of miles, it tells a story that is striking in its unity and consistency and difficult if not impossible to account for apart from divine inspiration. If divinely inspired, the Church it describes must be His agency in the universe. And as God established the Church the divinely inspired Bible must be its standard of faith and practice.

When Israel came out of Egypt, God set Moses as head of the Congregation of Israel (Exodus 3-5) and he did have helpers to assist in the day-to-day activities of the Nation. The cares of the entire congregation were too much for one man, and Moses' attempt to tend to all them by himself wore both him and the congregation down. Moses' father-in-law suggested he appoint people to handle daily concerns; the congregation's version of visiting the sick (Ex. 18:14-27). These original "deacons" were appointed by Moses, not over him; there is no evidence that he was in any way, shape or form responsible to them for his maintaining his leadership position or that the final authority for major decision resided in anyone other than Moses. The 103rd Psalm even alludes to the wisdom of this choice; a large group may well be familiar with the acts of God but one person will be much more able to discern God's will (Psalm 103:7). Indeed, in the account of Nadab and Abihu, we see God's approval of Moses' decisions as to delegated authority in His stern response to their unauthorized assumption of spiritual authority (Numbers 10:1-3). Further evidence of God's attitude concerning leadership is seen throughout the trek across the desert, with one example of God's allowing leprosy on Aaron and Miriam as a direct result of their criticism of Moses' decisions (Numbers 12:1-10) and another being God's

response to the rebellion of Korah the priest (Numbers 16:1-10, :28-34). A great example of God rewarding faithfulness to leadership is seen in the relationship of David and Saul. Despite Saul's many attempts to kill him, David refused to touch God's anointed leader even after God had rejected Saul from leadership over Israel. David's respect for authority was so great that he even ordered the execution of a man that reported the death of Saul (2 Samuel 11-16). We cordially suggest this attitude toward leadership is a key reason David is the key figure of the Old Testament; the books of 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles are full of the phrases "...who did after his father David." and "...who did not after his father David."

Moving on through the history of the Old Testament, whether in the era of the Judges, Kings or the post-exile Governors, we still see the theme of one person being in civil charge as Judge, King, or Governor or spiritual charge as High Priest without direct responsibility to any form of committee or board. The civil head did have councilors and other helpers. Some examples are seen in the aforementioned system Moses set up during the 40 years' wandering in the wilderness, and in several references to the Kings of Israel and Judah having "counselors". The Hebrew word there (Strong's # 3289) appears as either "counselor" or "counselors" a total of 17 times in the Old Testament, in each case referring to a person that offered advice to a leader, not a person that had final authority to determine whether a leader would be placed or maintained in a position of leadership. The High Priest had various helpers to assist him in his duties, as well. The first reference to these is seen in Exodus 28:1, where God Himself lists the original members of the priesthood. Noteworthy here is no mention whatsoever of any form of board or committee that Aaron would be responsible to for his office of High Priest. Later in the Old Testament, we see King David appoint the High Priest's assistants (1 Chronicles 23:4-6; 24:27; 24:1-3), the singers in the Temple (1 Chronicles 25:1), and even the gatekeepers (1 Chronicles 26:1). The Old Testament is reasonably clear that it is the economy of God for one person to have final leadership responsibility and appoint assistants with specific responsibilities as needed.

We see the beginning of the deacon in the sixth chapter of the book of Acts in the New Testament, but still with the underlying theme of being people being appointed by leadership to have particular responsibility of a given, specific area (Acts 6:1-4); over "...this business..." not all business. The business in question was specifically serving widows. While the initial choices were made by the congregation, the Apostles reserved final choice over who would actually serve. Interestingly the word "ministration" in Verse One is a Greek word, diakonos, and this is where we get the word "deacon" from. The overall ministration (deaconship, if you will) of the Word remained the responsibility of the Apostles; with the help of the Holy Ghost, they decided what outreaches would be made (Acts 16:4), who would be sent to the mission field (Acts 13:1-2), and who would be ordained or recognized as ministers of the Gospel (Acts 15:2). Further in the New Testament, in the list of the ministry gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor

and teacher found in Ephesians 4:11, Paul specifically states that God set these gifts in the Church (Ephesians 4:11-12). New Testament order is leadership (i.e. the local pastor) preparing the saints for the work of the ministry; training the members of the church to go and do the Gospel. In none of his three epistles to pastors of local congregations, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, does Paul give any direction for working with deacon boards. Actually, Pastor Timothy was given a list of qualifications to consider for those he would consider appointing as his deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13). The pastor-deacon relationship is clearly defined: the pastor is to appoint deacons to help in the work of the ministry as required. Rather than being hired or screened by the deacons, the pastor appoints them to their offices and they serve at his pleasure. Reason dictates the executive power to appoint to a given office carries the power to remove from that office at will. The New Testament teaching of leadership appointing assistants for given tasks is alluded to in the 9th chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews; just as in the Old Testament helpers were appointed to assist in various specific temple duties, so in the New Testament Jesus appoints Himself pastors with specific duties for local churches and they are to appoint themselves deacons with specific responsibilities. The Beloved Apostle, John, even cautions local congregations against an individual, Diotrephes, who apparently was attempting to raise up a faction opposed to the work in that area (3 John 9). Finally, in the Book of Revelation, the letters to the seven churches are addressed to the "angels" of the churches (Revelation 2:1-3:22). Some translations render this word "messenger" and considering that the pastor is God's messenger in the local church this seems in order. In conclusion, the entire Bible teaches unified leadership having final authority appointing assistants having specific defined duties.

There are three main systems of church government in practice in Christendom and first to be examined is the Episcopal system. This is a very hierarchical system, and to varying degrees, examples are seen bodies as diverse as the Episcopal/Anglican Church, the United Methodist Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the pentecostal Church of God (Cleveland, TN). The local pastor will have a direct supervisor (District Overseer in the Church of God) who will have a supervisor, and so on up to the temporal head of the denomination (Pope Benedict in the Roman Catholic Church, or the current General Overseer of the Church of God). The denomination assigns the pastor to the local church, and how the pastor is relieved of his duties varies by denomination. Some allow rotation by regular congregation vote (i.e. the congregation will vote on whether to maintain the pastor), others regularly rotate pastors, and still others allow pastors to serve "at pleasure" and have procedures where the congregation can request a different pastor. A major criticism of this form of government is that it can tend to stifle innovation, and one major benefit to this form of church government is that it can ensure uniformity of practice. Whether in the hills of Tennessee or in St. Maarten in the Netherlands Antilles, a member of an Episcopal based church can have an idea who to see for differing needs immediately on moving into a new area. Next is the Presbyterian system; while less hierarchical than an Episcopalian church, there is still a fairly formal

leadership structure. Examples are seen in the Assemblies of God, certain Baptist sects, and the several Presbyterian denominations. Here, the local church's elder or deacon board or presbyters invite or dismiss pastors. Generally, the congregation appoints or votes on membership to the board. One weakness of this system is that it can allow a single wealthy member or a cabal of members to permanently affect the body life of the congregation by dismissing an unpopular pastor and one benefit is this increased flexibility can allow a congregation to seek more dynamic leadership. Finally is the Congregational system of church government. Loosest among organized denominations, the local congregation hires and dismisses pastors at will and is nearly (and in some cases completely) independent of any other group. Examples are seen in the Congregational Church, the Church of Christ as well as many Baptist, Mennonite, and Amish sects. The local congregation also generally appoints committees or "deacon boards" to oversee the day-to-day affairs of the church. The pastor in a church organized along these principles is directly responsible to the congregation and serves at their pleasure. A major weakness in this system is that the pastors of congregational churches tend to shy away from unpopular messages and innovation. Another weakness seen is that disagreements over who should pastor the church, daily business concerns and other issues can (and often do) lead to church splits, as seen in the profusion of Baptist, Mennonite and Amish sects and individual congregations; as one minister has said, the priesthood of the believer has been preached to the point that the authority of the local church (and local pastor) has been marginalized. In some parts of the country, one will hear the comment, "I wouldn't go to a church where they tried to tell me how to live."

In many independent Evangelical and Charismatic circles, the local church is operated in a substantively different fashion from any of the above. In many such congregations, the pastor has the final say in the day-to-day operation of the church; secretaries, associate pastors and other church employees serve at his discretion, and final authority for major business decisions (such as the purchase of vehicles or real property and construction contracts) rests with the pastor, as well. Further, as these sort of congregations are not part of formal denominations, the church itself is usually an independent non-profit organization; if the pastor were to be removed, the organization would cease to exist or would require major re-organization. In general, while the pastor of a church organized along these lines will not be relieved of duty except in the most extreme of circumstances (one example being the pastor in Colorado recently), his salary will be determined by a board made up of his peers or selected members of the local church. A great advantage here is that the pastor is free to lead the people where he perceives that God wants them to go, and one disadvantage is that it can lead to exploitative relationships. However, this is offset by that fact that here in the United States church membership is completely voluntary; the member is free to terminate membership at will.

The Bible's teaching that pastors should have final authority for major concerns in the local church should not be interpreted to mean that a pastor should be a despot, lording it over God's people. Instead, the balance is found in God's Word in the book of Hebrews. While Paul does enjoin the Hebrew believers to submit to and obey those placed in authority over them, he does give the balance: while the New Testament pastor should not properly be directly responsible to any board, committee or congregation for his leadership position, he is directly responsible to an Authority higher than any other: The Lord of Hosts (Hebrews 13:17). We may rest assured that God Himself will speedily avenge any injustice done to a congregation.

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