



BIBLICAL PATTERNS OF CHURCH GOVERNANCE

Today there are vast arrays of church government structures. From Catholicism, which practices an Episcopalianism form of government, to Southern Baptist, who practices a form of Congregationalism; churches are structured very differently. Each form of church government finds some, not all, of their elements within the contents of Scripture. As Dr. Benjamin Merkle rightly points out,

Although some aspects of church polity are clearly set forth in Scripture, other aspects are less clear. As a result, at certain points we must allow for some flexibility, knowing that our personal preferences should not be put on par with Scripture. It is necessary, therefore, that we approach the issue of church government with humility and with a teachable spirit.¹

This short research assignment will seek to understand a biblical pattern of church government by: laying a solid biblical foundation for the role of church polity, the hermeneutical lens in which to view church polity, and the offices and leaders of church polity.

Biblical Foundation for Church Polity

Genesis 1 provides a description and overview of God's creation of man, along with the commands bestowed to him. God commands man, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth (Gen 1:28 ESV)." God gives man the duty of naming all the animals as well as, oversight and leadership over woman. God is establishing man as the

¹ Benjamin L. Merkle, *Why Elders: A Biblical and Practical Guide for Church Members* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 10.

leader and head over the created order and family. In other words, it is God who is delegating responsibility to man to lead, steward, and oversee his created order. It is this basis Paul builds his theological case against women having authority over man in 1 Tim 2:12-15.

Later in the book of Exodus, God calls out Moses and sends him to Egypt to be the leader and mediator God will use to redeem and save his people. Moses is apprehensive about the calling of God on his life. God promises to provide someone to aid him in his calling, namely his brother Aaron. After the exodus, while in the wilderness, Moses is overseeing and leading the people of Israel. However, his father-in-law visits him and sees that he is wearing himself out, trying to perform the duties of a single leader. With wise insight, his father-in-law tells him, “Look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens. (Ex 18:21)” In summary, Moses needed help leading and governing Israel under the calling of God.

Within the nation of Israel, God lead Moses to delegate to the tribe of Levi, or the Levites, the oversight of the temple and temple worship. The Levites were consecrated to God and given by God as a gift to Israel so that they might carry out the duties of the tabernacle, and later the temple.² The priests were mediators between God and the people. After the conquest and settling of the Promise Land, God rose up judges to save, lead, and judge his people.

The period of the judges ended when Israel desired to be like all other nations and have a king of their own. Although this was a rejection of God being their king, God nevertheless elected and appointed who he wanted. In progression God elected Saul, David, and Solomon as king prior to the kingdom being split under king Rehoboam. During the kingdom period, God

² Gary Smith, *The Holman Bible Dictionary*, ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 876.

would call, commission, and appoint prophets that would speak on behalf of God to the people and the kings, as well as, other nations. Prophets, in addition to serving judges and kings, also addressed Israel's worship or lack thereof. They were in effect the 'preachers' and 'pastors' of the Old Testament.

What does all this mean? It means that God appoints people, particularly men, to lead, steward, and oversee his created order, his nation, his kingdom, and his worship. Even on a deeper level, God appointed Moses to lead Israel to be "My treasured possession among all people...and a kingdom of priests and holy nation" (Ex 19:5,6 ESV). God therefore appointed Moses to lead, steward, and oversee Israel, so that Israel might be a light to other nations, which would be a partial fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham 'that all the families of the earth would be blessed' (Gen 12:3 ESV).

A Hermeneutical Lens to View Church Polity

In light of this very brief overview of the way God works to govern his created order, people, nation, and worship, it should be no different when the church is birthed at Pentecost. The difference between the Old Testament and New Testament in regards to governance is the clarity of God's mission. Throughout Scripture God is consumed with his glory and making his name known. The fall of man robbed God of his glory, and it has been his desire ever since to restore man's relationship with him, so that they might bring him glory. After the dispersion of man from Babel in Gen 11, God's desire is not to reach one particular group, but all nations, so that they may bring him glory. This mission is brought to complete clarity in Jesus' Great Commission.

This command becomes the chief foundation of Christ's purpose for the Church, which is to make disciples of all nations, baptize them, and teach them everything Jesus taught them. What this command does not do is lend itself to the building of an institution, but of God's kingdom. Jim Belcher in his book, *Deep Church*, says institutionalism can kill a church.³ A potential hazard of developing and implementing church polity is creating an institution rather than fulfilling the mandate to build a kingdom. Therefore, we should read and interpret the offices of the church in light of the mission of God.

Offices of the Church Polity

The New Testament speaks of two offices of the church, elders and deacons⁴, who will lead the church to fulfill the Great Commission. These offices will lead, steward, oversee, shepherd, teach, support, encourage, and serve the building up of God's kingdom, through the making of disciples. Elders function to facilitate the governance and growth of the church, whereas the deacon will function as a supporting role to the elder, through serving the body. Elder (*presbuteros*), Overseer/Bishop (*episkopos*), Pastor (*poimen*) are three distinct words that 'refer to the same office and the same work of pasturing'.⁵ The variance of words highlights the particular function of that office. John MacArthur says, "*Elder* emphasizes who the man is, *bishop* speaks of what he does, and *pastor* deals with his attitude and character."⁶ 1 Timothy 3:1-7 lists the qualification of an elder, whereas 1 Pet 5:1-3 lists in lucid detail the various roles of an elder.

³ Jim Belcher, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Books, 2009), 161.

⁴ Peter Toon et al., *Who Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 142.

⁵ Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2005), 131.

⁶ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Ephesians* (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 144.

The biblical pattern for elders in the first century church was to have a plurality of elders that would lead in various roles (Acts 14:23, 20:17, Titus 1:5, Heb 13:7,17,24, Jas 5:14, 1 Pet 5:1-2). As Merkle points out, “The concept of shared leadership is a common theme in the Bible. In the Old Testament, leadership was shared by the elders of Israel. In the New Testament, Jesus chose twelve apostles to lead the church... This pattern of plurality was continued with the establishment of the Christian eldership.”⁷ Throughout the New Testament where the word ‘elder’ is used, it is almost always in the plural.⁸ Dever notes that a plurality of elders balances pastoral weakness, diffuses congregational criticism, adds pastoral wisdom, indigenizes leadership, enables corrective discipline, and defuses an ‘us vs. him’ mentality.⁹ The qualifications of elders can be found in 1 Tim 3:1-7.

Among a plurality of elders, is there a main leader? Does one elder carry more weight than the others? To answer these questions, Samuel E. Waldron refers to what he calls ‘the parity of elders’.¹⁰ He states, “By advocating the parity of elders I am saying that every elder has the same authority or rule in the church. I am not saying that each elder has the same influence or power.”¹¹ On the other hand Paige Patterson asserts there were, in most cases, a pattern of plural elders, yet a decisive leader emerged within the plural leadership.¹²

There is no question that Peter, James, and John received somewhat of a special treatment from Jesus and who emerged as the main leaders of the twelve. Also, Peter, John, James (the half brother of Jesus), Paul, Timothy, and Titus emerge as leaders of the church that others listen and submit to. While both Waldron and Patterson have valid points, there is a fine balance

⁷ Merkle, *Why Elders?*, 28.

⁸ Merkle, *Why Elders?*, 30.

⁹ Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church*, 133-34.

¹⁰ Samuel E. Waldron, *Who Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government*, ed. Paul E. Engle (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 214.

¹¹ Waldron, *Who Runs the Church?*, 214.

¹² Waldron, *Who Runs the Church?*, 240.

between the two thoughts. While elders, as the word is used in the context of Scripture, are equal in their duties, obligations, authority, functions, and roles, there should always be a decisive leader who works alongside the other elders in shepherding, overseeing, administering, governing, ruling, and equipping the saints for the work of ministry.

The family has a head: the man. The nation of Israel had a head father: Abraham. Israel had a head leader: Moses and then Joshua. Israel would have a head king: such as David. In each of these cases God would be the ultimate head, but would have a point man to lead. Same is true in the church: Jesus is the ultimate head, whereas there would be a lead elder, who works along side of and in conjunction with other elders to lead the church to accomplish the mission of making disciples of all nations. Leading the church to accomplish this mission, elders would need support.

Acts 6:1-4 provides a clarifying description of the roles that deacons fill in the church. Mark Dever states in the context of Acts 6, “Deacons, then, serve to care for the physical and financial needs of the church, and they do so in a way that heals divisions, brings unity under the Word, and supports the leadership of the elders.”¹³ John Hammet says,

While deacon is the universal term for this office, the word diakonos and related terms in the New Testament are much more often translated by terms like servant or minister. The verb diakoneo is found thirty-six times in the New Testament reflecting the same uses of the term as secular Greek: to wait on someone at a table, to care for someone’s basic needs, or to serve in a general sense.¹⁴

1 Timothy 3:8-13 describes the qualifications of the deacons. The most significant difference between an elder and a deacon is the ability to teach. The roles of deacons are vital to the overall health of the church. Think of deacons as the Aarons and Hurs, who helped Moses keep his staff up in the air while fighting the Amaelikes in Ex 17. Deacons are those who

¹³ Mark Dever and Paul Alexander, *The Deliberate Church*, 132.

¹⁴ John S. Hammet, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005), 191.

function as support beams who free the elders to minister, lead, rule, and shepherd the people of God through prayer and the Word. In addition to their value of the support they bring to the elders, they also bring value into the overall unity of the church. By ministering and serving the body, they meet the physical, emotional, and financial needs of its members.

In light of the role descriptions of elders and deacons, what is the role of the congregation? In an Episcopalian form of church government the congregation has a passive role¹⁵ whereas in a Presbyterian form of church government the congregation takes on a more selective role in electing or giving approval to those nominated by existing elders.¹⁶ However in a Congregational form of church government, the more dominant view within Congregationalism is a governmental structure that involves democratic participation, with every member having an equal voice and vote.¹⁷ In light of the biblical scope of Scripture, God has never revealed himself as one who established a form of government through his people or his nation that is purely democratic. Therefore to suggest that the New Testament teaches that the church is purely a democracy that is lead and facilitated by elders, who are contemporaries of everyone, is a far stretch.

There is active participation from the congregation in certain aspects of the church. In Acts 6:3 says, “Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.” Here the apostles, the leaders of the church, outlined the character descriptions these servants were to possess. Not only did they do this, but after the people elected the men, the apostles were the final authority of appointing them. Acts 13: 2-3 says, “While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said,

¹⁵ Hammet, *Biblical Foundation for Baptist Churches*, 140.

¹⁶ Hammet, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Church*, 140.

¹⁷ Hammet, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Church*, 143.

‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.” Acts 13 the church laid hands and commissioned Saul and Barnabas to be sent out to proclaim the gospel. These are descriptions of the church’s active involvement.

The congregations are also taught to serve each other through the God given gifts that have been bestowed on them through grace (Eph 4:11-16, 1 Cor 12:1-31, Rom 12:3-8). Also, Paul tells the church in Corinth (1 Cor 5:13), “Purge the evil person from among you,” and in Matt 18 Jesus teaches that if a brother or sister will not repent from the rebuke brought before the church, the church is to gracefully extract them. As one can see the congregation or members of the church are very active. Although they select deacons to serve them, the congregation, in the New Testament, is never seen selecting elders.

Paul writes to Titus (1:5) and tells him, “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.” Hebrews 13:7 says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.” 1 Thessalonians 5:12 says, “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.” It is very clear that elders are given more weight and authority in the church than that of the regular congregants. In summary the congregants elect deacons, pray and commission those sent for missionary and ministry service, build up the body of Christ through their God given gifts, expel ungodly and unrepentant members, and submit to the authority and rule of its elder leaders.

In conclusion, the biblical pattern of church government must be one that fits into the overall theology of God's mission. The governmental structure that God would have us implement would be fluid, effective, and efficient to make disciples of all nations. What has happened, especially here in America, over the last century, has become what has been referred to as institutionalism. This has lead churches to become more about the business of the church rather than the business of God's mission. Therefore church polity has restricted the growth of the church rather than promoting the movement of the church.

God's government is simple. As everything else, it is centered around his glory, rule, and reign as well as his desire to reach all nations so that there might be a remnant who will worship, praise, adore and glorify him as the one true God. Therefore, Jesus through his death, burial, and resurrection has become the head of the church. Through his Spirit he has divinely called men to function as elders/shepherds/overseers/pastors who equip the saints for the work of the ministry. He also calls men and/or women to the office of deacon to serve and minister to the body of Christ in various capacities that will free the elders to spend more time in prayer and the word of God. In conclusion, these offices have been ordained by God in order for His mission to be fulfilled.

