



...'*Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,*' Says the LORD of hosts.
Zechariah 4:6

Which Government is Meant?

Four basic forms of Church government have been argued from the Bible:

1. Papal, meaning that which relates to the Pope or the Roman Catholic Church.
2. Episcopal, from the Greek New Testament word *episkopos*, translated *bishop* or *overseer*.
3. Presbyterian, from the Greek New Testament word *presbuteros*, translated *elder*.
4. Congregational, which relates to the entire congregation governing itself.

Papal:

- being changed to bring change -

We obviously reject the papal government of the Roman Catholic Church, but I want to mention it in passing. Catholic theologians appeal Scripturally to Matthew 16:18-19,

Matthew 16:18 And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

Matthew 16:19 And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

The **rock** is argued to be Peter himself as the first in rank of the Twelve. This saying is taken as indication that Jesus granted to Peter a primary position. The **keys** are understood as referring to authority as well as to forgiveness of sins. The primacy of Peter as bishop of Rome (pope) was and is being transmitted to his

successors in the bishopric of Rome, and hence the Church at Rome has a primacy over all other churches.

In truth, the **rock** is the truth Peter declared under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, when in verse sixteen he said, **You are the Christ, the Son of the living God**. The supposed authority to forgive sin is really the authority to declare that, through faith in Jesus, sins can be forgiven.

Let's look, then, at the three forms of Church government found in Protestant Churches.

Episcopal is derived from *episkopos*, translated *bishop* or *overseer*. It emphasizes the authority of a single leader over the other offices of the local Church. The man, sometimes called a bishop or a priest, is normally the pastor.

Those who see an episcopal system in the New Testament point to the obviously important position of James at Jerusalem in the Book of Acts. The authority of Timothy and Titus as revealed in the Pastoral Epistles show these men to have been the single-pastors and thus the leaders of their congregations.

In practice, the pastor never leads alone. He is called upon to select elders and/or deacons to help him with the work of the ministry, and they govern together. However, since the pastor is appointed to choose them, he is seen as having some final spiritual authority over them.

The **Presbyterian** system emphasizes the importance of the *presbyters*, normally called *elders*. The New Testament refers a number of times to elders who served in the role of church leadership (Acts 14:23; 15:2; 20:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14). Apparently each church had more than one as the word is usually found in the plural. Thus Presbyterian Church government is also referred to as a *plurality of elders*.

The proponents of Presbyterian government say that the terms elder, bishop, and pastor **all** refer to the same office, but different functions. The pastor is the pastor-teacher of Ephesians four, the man called upon to do the majority of teaching. Elder is said to refer to the

character of the man; he must meet the requirements set forth in Scripture (1 Timothy 3:1-7). Bishop (or overseer) relates to the more general functions of administration.

The key feature of the plurality of elders is that these men rule together, as a group, equally, with no greater authority afforded any one of them.

As the name implies, **congregational** government puts the emphasis on the congregation as a whole to act and decide. There are still offices, like elder and deacon; but the final authority is with the entire congregation. The chief scriptural evidences of this position are the facts that Christ is the head of his Church (Colossians 1:18) and that there is a priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:9). It is fundamental to New Testament teaching that Christ has not left His Church. He is the living Lord among his people. Where but two or three are gathered in His name, He is in the midst. Nor is it any less fundamental that the way into the very holiest of all presences is open to the humblest believer (Hebrews 10:19-20).

Adherents of congregational government point to the choosing of the seven deacons, where the whole congregation was involved in identifying the seven Spirit-filled men.

The Didache, an ancient church manual which was written late in the First Century or early in the Second gives the following directions:

Elect therefore for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men meek, not avaricious, and true and approved: for they too minister to you the ministry of the prophets and teachers (Chapter XV, 1).

I want to add that proponents from each of these camps are extremely dedicated to the position they hold. **Especially** the plurality of elder folks. If you don't agree with them... *You might not be a believer!*

Here is a representative quote criticizing Episcopal and congregational Church government:

Thus, a "dictator" leader who makes the decisions (whether called elder, or bishop, or pastor) is unscriptural (Acts 1:23, 26; 6:3, 5; 15:22, 30; 2 Corinthians

8:19). So, too, is a congregational-ruled church that does not give weight to the elders, or church leaders' input.

The plurality of elders position is being promoted more-and-more dogmatically. I've heard of Churches that have split because certain individuals have been 'converted' to the plurality of elders as being the only possible biblical form of governing the Church. If you receive e-mail, I sent you a PDF copy of Manfred Kober's pamphlet, *The Case for the Singularity of Pastors*. I did it only to show that other viewpoints – like the Episcopal - are equally biblical.

What should we conclude? Which form of Church government is the one taught in Scripture?

We should conclude that the New Testament teaches no one form of Church government!

I like this quote from Leon Morris, who is a noted biblical scholar. He said,

A consideration of all the evidence leaves us with the conclusion that it is impossible to read back any of our modern systems into the apostolic age. If we are determined to shut our eyes to all that conflicts with our own system we may find it there, but scarcely otherwise. It is better to recognize that in the New Testament church there were elements that were capable of being developed into the episcopal, presbyterian, and congregational systems and which in point of fact have so developed. But while there is no reason that any modern Christian should not hold fast to his particular church [government] and rejoice in the values it secures to him, that does not give him license to unchurch others whose reading of the evidence is different.

Another quote, by E.M. Bounds, puts our own form of government into perspective. He said,

What the Church needs to-day is not more machinery or better, not new organizations or more and novel methods, but men whom the Holy Ghost can use - men of prayer, men mighty in prayer. The Holy Ghost does not flow through methods, but through men. He does not come on machinery, but on men. He does not anoint plans, but men - men of prayer.

E.M. Bounds was talking about prayer. But his fundamental point, that God uses men, not methods, is appropriate to our discussion of Church government.

The adherents to all the forms of Church government we've mentioned admit that the New Testament mentions certain men in positions of leadership: Pastors, elders, and deacons. Beyond mentioning these men, or their offices, there is almost no real teaching about how they are to function together. There is no one model of exactly how the first century Church was governed; or how the Church in subsequent centuries should be governed.

Our understanding of Church government is that God should sovereignly call, gift, and raise-up men in each of these offices. Then they should function together in unity, through prayer, seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit based upon the Word of God.

A simple reading of the New Testament seems to indicate that God wants to give each congregation a pastor to lead them spiritually. Pastors, called pastor-teachers, are said to be a gift from God to His Church (Ephesians four). As mentioned earlier, Timothy and Titus were men God raised-up to pastor the Churches at Ephesus and Crete respectively. The fact they were instructed to oversee the appointment of both elders and deacons indicates they had some spiritual authority over those men. It tells us that those men were raised-up by God to come alongside the pastor to support him in the work of the ministry.

The Kober pamphlet lists six arguments for the position of a single pastor in the local Church who is not 'just' another elder:

1. The qualification of Church officers in 1 Timothy 3 mentions the bishop (*episkopos*) in the singular and the deacons in the plural).
2. The "messengers" of the seven Churches in the Revelation of Jesus Christ were individual pastors that led the respective Churches.
3. The nature of the pastorate is such that the same spiritually mature man (elder) who is entrusted with the responsibility to feed the flock through teaching (pastor) is given the responsibility to oversee the Church (bishop).
4. Several singular pastors are mentioned in the New Testament: Timothy, James, Epaphras, Epaphroditus, and Titus.

5. The Asiatic Churches can be seen as beginning with single pastors.
6. The symbolism of Jesus as Chief Shepherd of His one indicates each Church flock has a single shepherd.

It seems that elders are men who help the pastor with the more apparently 'spiritual' tasks. Deacons were initially chosen to oversee a spiritual, but more 'physical' task – that of distributing provisions to widows (Acts 6).

So in simple terms, you have a pastor who has been given by God to a local congregation, who is then aided in the work of the ministry by elders and deacons. God gives the congregation their pastor who then oversees the appointment of elders and deacons whom God seems to be raising-up out of the congregation. They then work together for the good of the congregation.

The congregation is automatically included by the representation of the men in their respective offices. They know and love the people; and, by definition, are only given as pastor, and raised-up as elders and deacons, because they desire to serve the people.

Decisions are best made by consensus after prayer and seeking the Lord. If a decision needs to be made, and there is no consensus... Then the pastor should have the authority to make it.

The logical argument raised by the plurality people is that a group of men are more accountable than one man, and are less likely to make mistakes. I would say that pastor-teachers are rarely unaccountable; and I've seen groups of men make terrible errors! Often their reluctance to make a decision is itself an error.

Our situation in Hanford is a pretty common example of how things actually work. A group of believers in Kings County were attending Calvary Chapel of Visalia. The pastor and elders in Visalia were led to start a Calvary Chapel here. They put an elder in charge of the fledgling work and began searching for a pastor-teacher to come and take the reins. It is the normal, spiritual approach to Church life.

I suppose the pastor-teacher could be the undisputed leader. I suppose the pastor-teacher could be 'just' another elder, with no greater authority. I suppose the congregation could vote on everything.

Better that we recognize what God has done in raising up certain men, in certain offices, to function together. If it comes to making a decision; setting a direction; having vision. That falls to the pastor-teacher; and there is nothing in Scripture that would overrule such a form of government.

Footnote:

We also are a non-profit religious corporation for the purposes of being able to receive offerings and provide a tax receipt.

As such, we have a corporate board that makes financial decisions.

It consists of: The pastor; an elder; two deacons; and an 'outside' pastor.



Calvary Hanford
- being changed to bring change -