

Local Church Government

By Dr. Dan Cheatham, www.devotional.net

How important is church government? I propose to you that it is of utmost importance! God wants His people to relate to one another in love, acceptance, and forgiveness, not in strain, drain, and pain. The local church is to be an oasis of love, not a political fiasco. The local church government must be on "Jesus' shoulders."¹

There are four basic forms of church government used in churches today. Obviously there are many variants within each of the four basic forms and often a church may be a mixture of more than one form.

Three forms have no scriptural basis. Only one lines up with the Book of Acts and the New Testament. Let's briefly discuss the first three forms. The titles of these government styles in no way reflect discredit upon the precious people which belong to the denominations or local churches of the same name. The titles merely reflect a structure. The first form is:

Episcopalian Government

In the extreme of this form of government, the hierarchy, or the pope, or the bishop, or the headquarters completely controls the local church from a distance. The local church has no "autonomy" of operation, and no vision of its own. The local church simply exists for "institution" sake. The institution puts a priest or so-called "leader" in the local church; then that leader must read the institution's liturgical prayers and lecture using the institution's liturgical "sermonettes." The local church is reduced to a puppet and the local pastor becomes a "company-boy" with no vision or true responsibility of his own for God's people.

Presbyterian Government

This form of government is different than the first in that the local church has slightly more "autonomy" of operation. In this form of government, a board of people (usually unscripturally termed a "presbytery" or board of "elders") from the local church, run the church. The local church's denomination sends the local church a "preacher". The "preacher" has no say-so whatsoever in the affairs of the church. He doesn't even get a vote. The so-called "presbytery" argues and votes on every minor detail of the church. The preacher is just there to deliver messages on Sunday mornings and "babysit" during the week. When the so-called "elders" get tired of the "preacher", or he begins to try to lead them contrary to their local bureaucracy, they "fire" him and request another "boy" from their institution's "cemetery". (Whoops, I mean "seminary").

Congregational Government

This form of government is popular in many churches today. It could also be termed the "democratic" or "American" form of church government. The problem with this form of government, however, is that the church of the Lord Jesus Christ is not a "democracy", but a "theocracy." Jesus is the head of the church. The church is not a political organization, it is a kingdom... the kingdom of God. Government in God's kingdom flows from the top down, not from the bottom up as in a democracy. A democracy may be fine for a civil government, but not for God's kingdom. Jesus doesn't ask a congress of angels or a supreme court of cherubims for approval of His policies. He is sovereign Lord. He is King. In the congregational form of government, there is some kind of local administrative voting "board", or "council", or "deacons", or "elders", or "presbytery" that debate and vote on issues. The senior pastor is part of that "committee" and gets one vote. On some issues, the entire congregation votes and decides if the man of God really heard from God or not. The pastor doesn't get to hear from God, he must hear from men instead. (In the New Testament, deacons were not "voters" but "helpers". Elders were not layman, but "called and separated 5-fold ministers of the gospel"). The problem with this form

of government is that the church moves at a snail's pace at best, while endeavoring to do the work of God. Every idea is held up in "litigation". This form of government puts the pastor in a "Catch-22." If he truly speaks the word of the Lord there will be times when it won't please the majority. And if a group of people in the church don't like what he says, or does, they can rise up and vote him out. So in a congregational government, the pastor is pressured to either be a God-pleaser and "buck the system", or to be a man-pleaser and compromise the Word of God. That is why many denominations today have to keep transferring their "lame-duck" preachers; so that the shepherd and sheep don't begin to fight. As long as the latest pastor and the congregation are in another "honeymoon" period, the church can't get into a fight. So before the "honeymoon" period wears off, the minister is transferred. A mature "marriage" between pastor and congregation never occurs. Divorce and remarriage is a necessity in this form of government. A long term vision can't be pursued, because the church is constantly playing "the dating game". In my opinion, this man-made system of church government, in a sense, forces God's people to "play the harlot".

Independent Government

This is the scriptural form of government. When God has a plan, He has a man. God gives a vision to His chosen vessel. The man of God imparts the vision to the local assembly and things begin to happen. Souls saved, disciples made, people healed, local outreach, world missions, supernatural worship, and mutual care between saints naturally just happens. God raises up and adds more five-fold ministry (staff elders) to assist the senior pastor. And God supernaturally raises up "right-hand men" as deacons to "serve" the people and "help" the senior pastor and pastoral staff RUN WITH A VISION. The senior pastor, elders, and deacons (better termed "helps ministers) watch as God develops gifts and ministries in the people. Then they give the people ministry opportunities. In this form of government, the senior pastor is in charge, but with a "servant" mindset as he prays and fasts before God, solicits comments from the congregation, seeks advice from staff elders and deacons and then MAKES DECISIONS. In this form of government there is no voting.²

The man of God must hear from God. Then the sheep bear witness as they follow their undershepherd, confident that he is following the Chief Shepherd. Only the churches that are forsaking years of men's traditions for freshly revealed Bible truth opt for this form of government. Only churches that are brave enough to quit leaning on the arm of flesh dare to adopt the independent form. Only churches that have living faith in God's Word do it God's way, instead of traditional ways. This is not to say that a church functioning with this scriptural form of government can't be networked with an organization of like-minded churches or belong to a ministerial association for accountability and enrichment. Networking, on the contrary, is extremely Biblical and helpful.

Trustees

We must remember that in the New Testament there is no mention of the word "trustees". No such role existed in the early church of Acts. In the early church God's people trusted in their spiritual leaders and the ministers trusted the people. The power of God was so manifested in the early church and there was so much persecution that the church didn't have time to "nit-pick" on "petty" things. Fasting and prayer was the order of the day instead of church bureaucracy. God's people were out "discipling" rather than "debating" within the four church walls. "Trust" rather than "suspicion" was the foundation of local churches. "Relationships" are more important than "paperwork". When a church degenerates from fasting, prayer, and evangelism, into much debating and voting, a church has lost its power and purpose for existence. Nevertheless, we must avoid all appearance of evil and obey the laws of the land. So a church should definitely be chartered and incorporated within their state. Furthermore, a church should obey the powers that be which are ordained of God and be registered with the IRS as an IRS 501(c)3 not-for-profit church. The minimum number of trustees required by law should be elected and the trustees should primarily be composed of the senior pastor, his wife, and one or two trusted proven friends or church members. This precludes a hostile takeover by someone who gets mad or by a group of church members who are not called and anointed by God to be leaders of the flock. Then the church should begin functioning as a New Testament church, the senior pastor and his church managing the affairs of the

church, with only the minimum number of trustee meetings and transactions being conducted as required by the law. The staff may or may not be composed of some of the same people on the board of trustees. But the staff should be God-called ministers of the Gospel who have proven their loyalty to the senior pastor.

Scriptural Basis For Elders & Deacons:

Philippians 1:1 KJV - Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to **all the saints** in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, **with the bishops and deacons.**

In the above scripture, Paul speaks of three categories of Christians, three functional groups within the local church. Saints, Bishops and Deacons. (Hopefully the Bishops and Deacons are Saints too! Ha!)

To understand what a true Elder is, one must let the bulk of scripture interpret and balance itself. No one scripture verse by itself completely defines what an Elder really is. Obviously the choice of words that is used in the New Testament for this spiritual leader automatically gives us an initial word picture. The fact that "elder" is used in the New Testament interchangeably to denote a Christian leader and also in other contexts to denote an older person, shows us that a leader is someone with more influence via their experience, age, training, or anointing.

But I propose that the scripture makes very clear what an Elder truly is.

Elder = Bishop = Pastor = Overseer = Spiritual Leader = Ephesians Chapter 4 Five-Fold Minister = Ordained Minister = Preacher/Teacher:

From all the scriptures I read, there is no such thing as a "LAY ELDER." An "ELDER" is undoubtedly a CALLED and SEPARATED Man or Woman of God, upon whom the anointing of God to FEED and LEAD rests. Carefully consider these scriptures:

1 Peter 5:1 KJV - "The **elders** which are among you I exhort, **who am also an elder**, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed; **Feed the flock** of God which is among you (**NIV: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care**), **taking the oversight** thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; 3 Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. 4 And when the **Chief Shepherd** shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away."

1 Timothy 3:1 KJV - "Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an **overseer (NIV and NLT: elder, MSG: provide leadership in the church)**, he desires a noble task." 1 Timothy 3:2 NLT - "For an **elder** must be a man whose life cannot be spoken against. He must be faithful to his wife. He must exhibit self-control, live wisely, and have a good reputation. He must enjoy having guests in his home and must be able to teach."

1 Timothy 2:1,2 AMP - "THE SAYING IS TRUE and irrefutable: If any man [eagerly] seeks the office of **bishop (superintendent, overseer)**, he desires an excellent task (work). Now a **bishop (superintendent, overseer)** must give no grounds for accusation..."

Acts 14:23 KJV - "And when they had **ordained them elders in every church**, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed."

1 Timothy 5:17 NIV - "The **elders who direct the affairs of the church** well are worthy of double honour, especially those **whose work is preaching and teaching.**"

In the above verse, it does seem to allude to the fact that there are some elders whose work is NOT to preach

and teach. This is about the only verse I can find that might justify one thinking that there is such a thing as a LAY ELDER. However, many elders' jobs in a local church may be more administrative or in counseling, so I lean towards thinking that this verse is referring to those leaders as opposed to a layman.

Now when I delineate between a LAYMAN and a CALLED MINISTER (commonly coined "clergy"), I am NOT drawing that difference as to whether they are in full time employed ministry as opposed to secular employment. Even Paul the Apostle was secularly engaged in his trade of tentmaking for periods of time while he was still in the ministry. Rather I am drawing the distinction between the two, not by employment status, but rather by THE CALL AND THE ANOINTING RESTING ON AN INDIVIDUAL THAT QUALIFIES THEM TO BE A LEADER AND FEEDER of God's people. A layman should NOT be in charge of governing a local church. A God-touched mouth is still the acid test of whether a person is called to the ministry. Of course, the scriptures also list character traits that either qualify or disqualify a person as well. But just because someone is a good leader in their secular profession DOES NOT qualify them to lead God's church. GOD HIMSELF decides whom to call and anoint to lead. To usurp and replace God's callings and giftings is a serious matter that can stunt the spiritual growth and direction of a local church at best, or cause God to withdraw His hand of blessing altogether, at worst.

Acts 20:28 NIV - "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which **the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds** of the church of God, which he bought with His own blood."

Ephesians 4 lists five ministries that are commonly known as the FIVE-FOLD MINISTRY: Apostles, prophets, evangelists, **PASTORS** and teachers. Below is a lexicon definition of the Greek Word translated "PASTOR."

"Pastor - 4166 poimhn poimen poy-mane'; TDNT-6:485,901; AV-shepherd 15, Shepherd 2, pastor 1; 18

1) a herdsman, esp. a shepherd

1a) in the parable, he to whose care and control others have committed themselves, and whose precepts they follow

2) metaph.

2a) the presiding officer, manager, director, of any assembly: so of Christ the Head of the church

2a1) of the overseers of the Christian assemblies

2a2) of kings and princes

++++

The tasks of a Near Eastern shepherd were:

- to watch for enemies trying to attack the sheep - to defend the sheep from attackers - to heal the wounded and sick sheep - to find and save lost or trapped sheep - to love them, sharing their lives and so earning their trust.

During World War II, a shepherd was a pilot who guided another pilot whose plane was partially disabled back to the base or carrier by flying alongside him to maintain visual contact."

Pastoral Leaders (Elders) may be male OR FEMALE: Examples are Deborah who was the Judge of Israel (Leader), Esther a Queen, Anna The "Prophetess" of Luke 2:36, Priscilla a Co-Pastor with her husband of their church, found in 1 Corinthians 16:19. Modern Examples are Aimee Simple McPherson, Kathryn Kuhlman, Marilyn Hickey, Joyce Meyers, Elaine Hollmer, and many others. The Bible clearly states in Acts 2:38 that God will pour out His Spirit on all flesh, on His SERVANTS (men) and HANDMAIDENS (women) and that "THEY" (Both the men and the women) would prophesy (preach, teach and move in the gifts of the Spirit).

What is a Deacon?

Here is the Easton's Bible Dictionary expansion of the Deacon: "Anglicized form of the Greek word diaconos, meaning a "runner," "messenger," "servant." For a long period a feeling of mutual jealousy had existed between the "Hebrews," or Jews proper, who spoke the sacred language of palestine, and the "Hellenists," or Jews of the Grecian speech, who had adopted the Grecian language, and read the Septuagint version of the Bible instead of the Hebrew. This jealousy early appeared in the Christian community. It was alleged by the Hellenists that their

widows were overlooked in the daily distribution of alms. This spirit must be checked. The apostles accordingly advised the disciples to look out for seven men of good report, full of the Holy Ghost, and men of practical wisdom, who should take entire charge of this distribution, leaving them free to devote themselves entirely to the spiritual functions of their office #Ac 6:1-6. This was accordingly done. Seven men were chosen, who appear from their names to have been Hellenists. The name "deacon" is nowhere applied to them in the New Testament; they are simply called "the seven" #Ac 21:8 Their office was at first secular, but it afterwards became also spiritual. Both Philip and Stephen, who were of "the seven," eventually preached and later became leaders; they did "the work of evangelists."

So we see that the word "Deacon" really means a "RUNNER", or a "SERVANT." Deacons are NOT then, called to GOVERN the local church, but rather to assist the pastoral staff (elders, or what is commonly called in the New Testament, a "presbytery") in carrying out the work of the Gospel. Deacons then, are NOT to be the decision makers in a local church, but rather key helpers, assistants, and department heads who carry out the vision of the senior pastor and pastoral staff. Deacons may obviously be decision makers in their respective areas of responsibility, but not the overall guides of the local church congregation. It is wrong for a lay "Deacon Board" to run a church; this is unscriptural. Likewise is it wrong for a similar arrangement called an "Administrative Board", to govern the local church.

Deacons may be male OR FEMALE:

Romans 16:1,3,12

Phil 4:2,3

1 Timothy 3:11

1 Timothy 5:9,10

Titus 2:3,4.

In these passages it is evident that females were then engaged in various Christian ministrations. The early church father, Pliny, makes mention of them also in his letter to Trajan (A.D. 110).