

Different Forms of Church Government

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This is a study of the differences between the governmental forms of traditional Christian churches. It will compare and contrast them with each other; and then with the biblical pattern for church government, as set forth in the New Testament. At the start of the study, it's important to emphasize that the purpose of this study is not to "throw stones" at traditional Christian churches. All believers in Christ are brothers and sisters. We are to love, edify and build up each other. With this clearly stated, we will begin the study.

Part One: An Overview of Four Forms of Christian Church Government

1. Episcopal Form of Church Government

This form of church government has been traditionally practiced by Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, The Church of God and others.

- a. The designation "Episcopal" originated from the original Greek word for "Bishop," which is "episcopos."
- b. Bishops are usually the highest governing authorities in the Episcopal form of church government.
- c. There are other governing agencies besides Bishops, but by and large, Bishops are the final authority in this form of church government.
- d. Some believe that this form of government grew out of a desire to re-establish Apostolic authority in the church.

2. Presbyterian Form of Church Government

In a Presbyterian form of government, authority is vested in a "Presbytery." This is the governing body chosen from within and by the congregation. It consists of the Church Elders.

- a. The designation "Presbyters" originated from the Greek word, "presbuteros," meaning "Elders,"

- b. These people are the authority in the church. They function together within the Presbytery.”

3. Congregational Form of Church Government

This form of church government is practiced by Baptists, The Assemblies of God, The Church of Christ, The Congregational Church, and other Christian denominations.

- a. This form of government asserts that the people who are members of the church should be the final authorities in the church. Everything is done by a democratic vote.
- b. A few hundred years ago, this type of government was influenced by the emergence in the Western world of democracies and their democratic ideals.

4. Independent Churches

In some independent churches, the Pastor is the sole authority.

- a. The church property may be held in a closed corporation by the Pastor’s family.
- b. There are some independent churches that have a board of deacons.
- c. The Pastor is usually a strong leader in an independent church. For the most part, the Pastor’s influence determines the policies of the church government.

In any study of church governments, it’s easy, and perhaps to be expected, that we will be influenced by our denominational affiliations and past teaching. Also, there may be other forms of church governments that are found throughout the world, but the four mentioned above are the most numerous.

The New Testament Pattern for Church Government

Now, let’s turn to the New Testament pattern for Christian church government. We will turn to the Bible as the final (and only infallible) authority on how Christians should govern their fellowships. It would be wise and constructive to understand the biblical pattern for governing our churches, because it has been established in the New Testament, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

a. The New Testament Words for “Church”

- “ecclesia”

This Greek word originally meant, “called out ones.” We understand this to refer to those who are called out of the world into the Kingdom of God. The “ecclesia” are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

- “kuriakos”

This Greek word originally meant, “belonging to the Lord.” Thus, we can see that we have been bought with the blood of Jesus and are no longer our own. We are His, and serve Him gladly.

b. The church is a Body called out from the world and called into Christ. Our first allegiance is to the Lord. We are to live in ways that please Him. We are Christ’s ambassadors. This means we are to have an eternal perspective and a God-pleasing attitude toward how we represent ourselves to the world.

Part Two: Local Church Government - Christ and Delegated Authority

1. Christ is the Head of His Church.

a. He is building His church. (Matthew 16:18)

He does this in many ways, but perhaps most importantly, Christ uses our participation and obedient service to do this.

b. He has all authority! (Matthew 28:18)

Christ is absolute in His authority. He will not be challenged and requires our obedience. He is the Head of the church. (Ephesians 1:20-22; Ephesians 4:15; Ephesians 5:23)

All church leadership must practice submission to Christ’s authority and fulfill His will in governing the church to the best of their abilities.

2. Christ governs His church through delegated authority.

Leadership in the church operates as His divinely appointed spiritual authorities. It’s a heavy responsibility and cannot be taken lightly. The church congregation is to respect spiritual authorities, who are doing their best to please and obey God.

- a. Christ, who ministered under the Father's authority, represented the Father. His disciples, who ministered under the authority of Christ and the Father, represented Christ. (Matthew 10:40; Luke 10:16)
 - b. To receive the disciples was to receive Christ and the Father. To reject Christ's disciples was to reject Christ and the Father. (Matthew 10:40. Luke 10:16)
 - c. In John 13:20, Christ expanded this truth that spiritual authority flowed from the Father, to Christ and then to the church leadership. He said His authority would include "whomsoever I send."
 - d. Our attitudes toward those whom Christ appoints as His delegated authorities in church government are the outward and visible expressions of our attitudes towards Christ and the Father.
3. Those appointed by Christ have been given His delegated authority.
- a. The ministries given by Christ to His church are these: Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors (Shepherds) and Teachers. (Ephesians 4:11)
 - b. The function of these five-fold ministers is to equip the believers to perform the job God calls them to do, so that the Body of Christ can be built up - both spiritually and numerically. (Ephesians 4:12-16)

Part Three: Local Church Government - Elders are Responsible to Govern the Local Church

1. Five titles used in the KJV refer to the same office.
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|-----------------------|--------------------|
| a. Elder | - d. "Presbuteros" |
| b. Bishop | - e. "Episkopos" |
| c. Shepherd or Pastor | - f. Poimen" |
2. Compare the following Scriptures.
- a. Acts 20:17 - Paul calls the Elders together... In Verse 28, he says to the Elders, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you "Overseers" (or Bishops), to feed (or Shepherd/Pastor)

the church of God.” Thus, the Elders were Bishops or Overseers, whose responsibility was to Shepherd or Pastor the flock.

- b. Titus 1:5 - Paul instructs the Elders and then, in Verse 7, he describes the qualifications of an Elder. Paul uses the word “Bishop.” Thus, Paul uses the words, “Elder” and “Bishop” interchangeably to refer to the same office.
- c. 1 Peter 5:1-5 - Peter writes, “The Elders which are among you I exhort, I, who am also an Elder (Literally, a “co-Elder)... Feed (Shepherd or Pastor) the flock of God, taking the ‘oversight’ (Be its Bishop).”
- d. The above Scriptures prove that Elders were also Bishops (Overseers) responsible to Shepherd (Pastor) the flock (congregation).

3. The ministry of an Elder is to rule and to teach.

- a. Teaching is not necessarily “pulpit teaching.” It could include personal counseling from the Word of God and teaching in a small group setting.
- b. 1 Timothy 5:17 - Elders are to “rule” and “labor in the Word and doctrine.” (teach)
- c. Hebrews 13:7 - Elders are to “have “rule” over you and have spoken unto you the Word of God.” (teach)
- d. 1 Thessalonians 5:12 - “...know them which labor among you and are over you in the Lord (rule) and admonish you.” (teach)
- e. 1 Timothy 3:2 - “Teach” ...Verse 5 - “rule”

4. What does to “rule” mean?

There are three original Greek words, translated “rule” in the KJV. Their meanings combine to give us a comprehensive understanding of ruling as a leader in the New Testament.

- a. “hegeomi” - This carries the meaning “to lead,” as a shepherd leads his sheep, or as a general leads his army.
 - Hebrews 13:7 - “remember them which have the rule over you.”
 - Hebrews 13:7 - “obey them that have the rule over you.”
 - Hebrews 13:24 - “salute them that have the rule over you.”
- This word, “rule,” which applies to the Elders governing

the church is the same word used of Jesus in Matthew 2:6, where it speaks of Him as a “Governor.” (The NKJV uses the word “Ruler.”)

b. “poimaino” - This word means “to shepherd,” as one who “feeds” and “rules” over his flock.

- John 21:16 - ““Feed” my sheep.”
- Acts 20:28 - ““Feed” the church of God...”
- 1 Peter 5:2 - ““Feed” the flock of God...”

Thus, to “shepherd” includes both “feeding” (teaching) and “ruling” (which agrees with Acts 20:28.)

c. “proistemi” - This word means “to be set over” or “at the head of.”

- 1 Thessalonians 5:12 - “...know them which labor among you, and “are over you” in the Lord, and admonish you.”
- Romans 12:8 - “he that “ruleth” with diligence.”
- 1 Timothy 3:4-5 - The word “rule” is used to suggest the relationship between the Elders “ruling” in the church and a father “ruling” in the home.
- 1 Timothy 5:17 - “let the Elders that “rule” well be considered worthy of double honor, especially they who labor in the Word and doctrine.”

Other Offices and Ministries Given to the Church

a. Apostle	An example is Jesus. He was a “Sent One.” An Apostle’s Purpose: to establish churches and set up local church government. (1 Corinthians 3:10; Ephesians 2:20)	Hebrews 3:1
b. Prophet	A prophet was an Old Testament “seer.” A true prophet’s ministry will be associated with these spiritual Gifts: Word of Wisdom, Word of Knowledge and Prophecy.	See the Nine Gifts of the Holy Spirit: 1 Cor. 12.
c. Evangelist	“One who brings the evangel, or brings the good news.”	Acts 21:8
d. Teacher	This designation does not speak of	Acts 13:1

a Sunday school teacher, but of a person in the called ministry of God. This ministry is filled with anointing and power. It's a ministry that will edify and build the Body of Christ. The teacher is needed in order that the Body of Christ will grow, according to the Word and purpose of God.	
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Part Four: Local Church Government - The Three Categories Making Up a Total Local Church

1. Bishops

- a. These would also be called Overseers, Pastors, Shepherds or Elders. (Refer to the information in Part Three on Page 4, above.)
- b. They would be responsible for governmental oversight of the church.

2. Deacons

- a. Deacons were elected to serve the church.
- b. The word "deacon" means "servant."

3. Saints or Believers

- a. The believers make up the congregation.
- b. Believers should obviously know the Elders who "are over you" in the church. (1 Thessalonians 5:12)

There should be a personal relationship between the Elders and the believers. Because of the growth and size differences of New Testament churches, not all believers would have the same personal relationship with every Elder in the local church.

Part Five: Local Church Government - Elders Must Govern in Plurality.

1. Scriptures to Support the Plurality of Elders

- a. Acts 14:23 - "they had ordained them Elders (plural) in every church (singular).
- b. Acts 15:2,4, 6, 22-23 - In every case, Elders are referred to in the plural while the church in Jerusalem is referred to in the singular.
- c. James 5:14 - "...call fro the Elders (plural) of the church (singular).
- d. Note the plurality of leadership in the following Scriptures:
1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:17; Philippians 1:1.
- e. Nowhere in the New Testament is there any reference to one Pastor (singular) of a local church.

2. Elders must govern in plurality, but also act in unity.

- a. Consider the example of the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- b. In Acts 13:1-4, the five Elders (Prophets and Teachers) were so related to the Lord and to one another, that when, in obedience to the Holy Spirit, they fasted, prayed and laid hands on Barnabas and Paul to send them on their missionary journey, it says, "being sent forth by the Holy Ghost..." (Verse 4)
- c. Each ruling Elder must be mutually submitted to the will and purpose of the whole group.
- d. Consider the benefits of Elders in plurality, yet unity.
 - i. It promotes mutual relationships.
 - ii. It encourages mutual submission.
 - iii. It provides the discipline, correction and counsel necessary for every leader (checks and balances).
 - iv. It develops spiritual maturity in each leader, as he submits his will at times, to the will of the whole group.
 - v. Unity creates the spiritual atmosphere in which God can bless the leaders and the whole body (Psalm 133).
 - vi. It develops a spiritual relationship among leaders which the Holy Spirit can use to give birth to guidance,

revelation, ministry, etc.

- vii. It prevents an elder from abusing his authority.
- e. In Acts 15, the Elders, (plural) in the church in Jerusalem were in such total unity (after “much disputing” - Verse 7) that it says, “It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us...” (Verse 28)

3. Plurality – Unity and “Headship”

- a. In the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit, there is not only plurality and unity, but the Godhead operates on the concept of “Headship.”
 - i. There is equality between the Father and the Son (John 5:17-18; Philippians 2:6), yet the Son recognizes the authority and the “Headship” of the Father (1 Corinthians 11:3).
 - ii. In this sense, Christ is equal to the Father, yet voluntarily submits to His authority and “Headship.”
- b. Just as in the Godhead, the plurality of Elders in the local church must recognize that one Elder is raised up by the Holy Spirit to be a “leader among equals.”
- c. The one Elder given this position of leadership must never seek to impose his will on the other Elders. Submission is always given voluntarily, otherwise it becomes domination.
- d. In Romans 12:6-8, Paul lists several “gifts” (“charismata”), among which he includes, “...he that ruleth let him do it with diligence...” The Holy Spirit imparts this “charisma” for ruling. This would be a special gift for administration and direction among the collective Eldership.
- e. With this special “charisma,” the Elder becomes the mouthpiece and representative of the whole group of leaders.
- f. Peter was this leader in Acts 2:14, “Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice and said...”
- g. James was the one upon whom the “charisma” of leadership rested in Acts 15.
- h. Only James was named with the other Elders in Jerusalem (Acts 21:18).
- i. In Revelation 1:4 and 1:11, John is told to write to the seven churches of Asia. In Revelation 2:1, he writes to the “angel”

(messenger) of the church of Ephesus. This was the Elder who was the spokesman and representative for the group of collective leaders - Elders in each local church.

- j. Anything without a head, or with more than one head is a freak.
- k. While Israel had Elders, God recognized the leadership of Moses as the primary authority in the camp.
- l. While judges ruled in Israel, God recognized Samuel's leadership.
- m. Every local church must have a plurality of Elders acting in unity, with one Elder recognized as having God's anointing for leadership among the other Elders.

Part Six: Local Church Government - Qualifications for Elders

1. Submissive Attitude

- a. One who exercises authority must be "under authority" (Luke 7:7-8).
- b. Submission is humility expressed in love and service (Philippians 2:5-11; John 13).
- c. Submission must be given voluntarily. Submission cannot be imposed. Otherwise, it becomes domination and produces exploitation, resentment and rebellion (Luke 22:25-27).
- d. Submission and service is God's method of promotion (Philippians 2:5-11; Matthew 20:25-28; Mark 10:42-45).
- e. An Elder must be submitted to the Lordship of Christ.
- f. An Elder must be submitted to his fellow Elders (1 Peter 5:5; Ephesians 5:21).
- g. An elder must be submitted to the authority of the Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16; Isaiah 8:20).
- h. Submission is an inner attitude of the spirit. This means that it is possible to obey without being submissive. (Refer to the elder brother in the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:25-30). Obviously, it is possible to be submissive, yet not be able to obey in specific instances (See Acts 4:19-20; Acts 5:29.).
- i. A submissive attitude and a willingness to be a servant keep a Christian free from pride. Knowledge alone puffs up, but

love builds up (1 Corinthians 8:1).

2. Faithfulness

a. Luke 16:10-12

- i. Faithfulness in little things qualifies one to be faithful in great things.
- ii. Faithfulness in finances qualifies one to be faithful in spiritual riches.
- iii. Faithfulness in another man's ministry (where one is willing to serve another) qualifies one to have his own ministry.

b. Matthew 20:26-27

A servant's attitude qualifies one to be great (a leader); and to be first in God's kingdom.

3. Training

a. Training must first be done through discipleship. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you..." (Matthew 28:19-20)

b. Jesus trained His disciples not merely what to teach, but also how to teach. It was training in "being," "doing" and "saying." Acts 1:1 and Mark 6:30 teach that Jesus emphasized what He did as well as what He taught; and the followers of Jesus reported what they did and what they taught."

c. In the Great Commission, Jesus instructed His disciples to make disciples and teach them to do what He had taught them.

d. In looking at the example of Jesus, we see the following steps:

- i. He called them and taught them by principles of submission and by example. His teaching emphasized the need to have a servant's attitude.
- ii. His followers then worked with Him under His personal supervision.
- iii. He gave His followers assignments and they reported back to Him.

- iv. As Christ's followers qualified in the areas outlined above, they became leaders in the church. Jesus called His followers "servants," "friends," and "brethren."
- v. Whatever formal training an Elder may have, the training and discipleship to build character, spiritual maturity, etc., and to learn all aspects of the ministry by practical experience under the influence of a godly and more experienced brother is invaluable.
- e. Discipleship training is not to restrict, but to release the believer for greater ministry.

4. Other Spiritual Qualifications

a. 1 Timothy 3:1-7

- i. Blameless
- ii. Husband of one wife (not a bigamist or polygamist)
- iii. Vigilant
- iv. Sober
- v. Good behavior
- vi. Given to hospitality
- vii. Apt to teach
- viii. Not given to wine
- ix. No striker
- x. Not greedy
- xi. Patient
- xii. Not a brawler
- xiii. Not covetous
- xiv. His house must be in order.
- xv. Not a novice
- xvi. Have a good name in the community

b. Titus 1:5-9

- i. Blameless
- ii. Husband of one wife (not a bigamist or polygamist)
- iii. Home in order
- iv. A good steward
- v. Not self-willed (is submissive)
- vi. Not soon angry
- vii. Not given to wine
- viii. No striker
- ix. Not given to filthy lucre (money)

- x. Hospitable
- xi. A lover of good men
- xii. Sober
- xiii. Just
- xiv. Holy
- xv. Temperate
- xvi. Able to teach the Word

5. Qualifications are safeguards.

- a. It is dangerous to promote any person too quickly, without the above qualifications as safeguards.
- b. A man should be tested in every area of his life before he becomes a leader in the church.
- c. No one should be appointed as an Elder in the church, unless he has the above qualifications. (It is easier to have a ceremony of “the laying on of hands” than to have a ceremony of the “laying off” of hands.)

Part Seven: Local Church Government - The Recognition and Appointment of Elders

1. An Elder is first called by the Holy Spirit.

- a. The Apostle Paul prepared for his ministry for several years before he was called specifically by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:1-5).
- b. Acts 20:28 - “The Holy Ghost hath made you overseers...”
- c. 1 Corinthians 12:28 - “...and God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers...”
- d. An Elder may be called by the Holy Spirit and God will place within his heart the desire for the ministry. However, no man should ever promote himself. Promotion comes from the Lord (Psalm 75:6-7).

2. A potential Elder who is called to, and qualified for the ministry by the Holy Spirit will be recognized and approved by the Elders.

- a. Timothy was “well reported of by the brethren...” in his home church before he was invited to join the Apostle Paul

- in his ministry.
- b. Timothy was “ordained” to the ministry when the Presbytery (Board of Elders) laid hands on him (1 Timothy 4:14). Thus, Timothy was recognized by the other Elders in his local church.
 - c. When Paul went to Jerusalem, he submitted to the Elders of the church and “they perceived the grace that was given unto me...” (Galatians 2:9)
 - d. Before an Elder is appointed, the plurality of Elders should be in complete unity. The rule must always be, “it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us...” (Acts 15:28)
3. For an Elder to give effective leadership, he must first be recognized and accepted by the congregation.
- a. While Elders are appointed by the other Elders (not voted on by the congregation), it is necessary for each Elder to be recognized by the congregation.
 - b. Believers must “know them which are over you in the Lord...” (1 Thessalonians 5:12) Believers are told to “remember them which have rule over you, who have spoken unto you the Word of God; whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation...” (Hebrews 13:7)
 - c. Believers are told to “obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they must give an account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief; for that is unprofitable for you...” (Hebrews 13:17)
 - d. Believers are told to “esteem them (the Elders who are ‘over you in the Lord’) very highly in love for their work’s sake...” (1 Thessalonians 5:13)
 - e. The above Scriptures make it necessary that there be a close relationship between the Elders and the members of the congregation. Obviously, there will be some personal relationships that will be closer than others. Not every Elder will be able to have a personal relationship with every believer, but every Elder should have a personal relationship with some believers.
 - f. To receive “whomever I send” as Christ’s delegated authority is to receive Christ and the Father (John 13:20).

4. Safeguards to Prevent an Elder from Abusing His Authority

- a. Christ is the Head of His Church (Ephesians 1:22).
- b. Promotion (and demotion) comes from the Lord (Psalm 75:6-7).
- c. If an Elder refuses to submit to the Word of God and the counsel and discipline of his fellow-Elders, he will be disciplined by the plurality of Elders and the congregation will be informed of their action (Matthew 18:15-17).

Deacons

The Greek meaning of the word “diakonos” is “to be an attendant, to serve.”

Qualifications for Deacons:

- a. Being a deacon carries the same character qualifications as an Elder, listed in 1 Timothy 3. Verse 10 says:
“And let these also first be proved; then let them use the office of a deacon, being found blameless.”
- b. As the church began to grow and needs arose, they “appointed” men to serve (diakonos) who were: (1) honest, (2) full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom (Acts 6:3).
- c. Deacons’ wives are to be “grave, not slanderers, sober, faithful in all things (1 Timothy 3:11).

Selection of Deacons:

- a. The selection of deacons is mentioned in two places in the New Testament. Both times, they were appointed (Acts 6 and 1 Timothy 3). Titus was instructed to “appoint” (ordain) Elders in every city. It doesn’t seem logical that they would appoint Elders (pastors) and then elect deacons.
- b. In Acts 6, the church body selected suitable men to become deacons, but the final appointment was made by Elders.
- c. The Bible does not specify length of service for deacons. It seems as though they served as long as there was a need and they were faithful.

Responsibility of Deacons

The word “deacon” means to serve. Therefore, it is not a matter of electing someone to the position of deacon and then giving him a

job to do. Rather, it is seeing the need and finding a man with the qualifications and attitude of serving; and appointing him to serve in that capacity.

Authority

God works through “delegated” authority. Deacons are promoted to that position because of their labors of love to work with, not rule over the Elders or church leadership. Unity and harmony in the Body is essential.

Women

In Romans 16:1, the word “serve” is used and can apply to a woman in the church, who can be appointed a deaconess. Literally taken, women can “serve” in some areas, which can be helpful, but “rule” is not implied. Therefore, to act in leadership of the church is not intended.

Editor’s note: This entire study represents the experience, education, highly respected teachings and opinions of Dr. Tom Peters.